



CHAPTER 3

Mapping Backwards: Underlying Philosophical Bases of Public Administration Scholarly Works

Abstract This chapter explores the direction of inquiry for connecting philosophy and public administration that takes the move from the critical analysis of existing scientific works in the field of public administration, to then detect and trace back the philosophical premises and underpinnings of such works. This direction of inquiry in connecting philosophy and public administration can be called 'backwards mapping'. Three ways in which backwards mapping may be performed are outlined: (i) by having the very authors of the research to make it explicit the philosophical underpinnings of their work; (ii) by having an *ex post* interpretation performed by a distinct scholar who reviews extant 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 that refer to philosophical scholarly works. Illustrative examples of these three approaches are presented and discussed.

Keywords Philosophy · Public administration · Backwards mapping · Philosophical underpinnings of public administration · Philosophy and public administration

OVERVIEW

The direction of inquiry for connecting philosophy and public administration proposed in this chapter takes the move from the critical analysis of existing scientific works in the field of PA (we use the shorthand ‘PA’ to encompass the fields of public administration, public management, public governance and government, referring to both the scholarly study and the practice of it—see Chapter 1 for further discussion of definitions and terminology), to then trace back and ‘unveil’ the underlying (often implicit) philosophical premises and underpinnings of such works. It is a form of (ideational) backwards mapping—which provides the rationale for the title of this chapter.

Backwards mapping can occur in at least three possible ways:

- it can be performed by the very authors of the research, who make it explicit the philosophical underpinnings of their work;
- it can be the resultant of an interpretation by other scholars of the philosophical underpinnings of a given PA publication or set of publications; or
- it can be investigated via bibliometric analyses, in order to trace what are the influences on a given PA publication.

The chapter discusses in detail each of these approaches and, based on applications of these approaches, aims to provide an appreciation of how philosophical thinking is being utilised by scholarly works and the extent to which it shapes the field of PA.

ELICITING AWARENESS AND FRAMING THE STANDARDS IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION SCHOLARSHIP

The first approach to substantiate backwards mapping from PA scholarly works to their philosophical inspirations and underpinnings entrusts the task of uncovering such underpinnings unto the very PA scholar authoring the work (we remind the reader: it is our assumption that philosophy is always there, in whatever we think or do as human beings, hence there is a philosophical element in any PA argument). Mapping backwards can in fact be performed by the very author(s) of the research, by making it explicit the philosophical underpinnings of their own work. In this perspective, the author ‘ought to’ feel compelled to consider

that disclosing one's own philosophical standpoint (which includes one's own values in an axiological perspective, but it also encompasses issues of ontology, epistemology and political philosophy) is part and parcel of the scholarly work and should see this as a 'standard component' of reporting about the findings of one's own inquiry into the investigated public administration problem or topic. This perspective can be seen as a 'call' to authors to rise to this task, based on a combination of voluntarism and a logic of appropriateness both being at work here. We hear the objection forming in the mind of the reader and we immediately notice that this rarely, or at least somewhat rarely, happens in practice in PA scholarly works (though not so rarely as one might think: see the bibliometric analysis by Tang et al., 2025, on whose findings we report more widely in the section below: 'Mapping the field: bibliometric analyses').

Several reasons can be found for why such 'disclosure' of the philosophical assumptions does not happen quite often in PA scholarship. One reason why this does not happen more often may lie in, very simply, the fact that this is not being expected nor required of a PA publication: a paper or a book can safely navigate all the route from submission to being accepted for publication without incurring any penalisation for not being explicit about its philosophical underpinnings and stance. This aspect is simply not deemed 'important', much less so a 'requirement', so why should an author bother and further complicate one's own argument in the prospective publication, and risk attracting the darts of the reviewers by walking on the slippery terrain of one's philosophical premises, when this is not required, neither formally nor informally? Moreover, making it explicit what the philosophical underpinnings of a piece of research are may not be an easy task, and PA scholars are unlikely to be professionally trained in philosophy, as this is generally not part of the educational curriculum and career paths in this field, hence the hurdle for adding this layer of analysis in the paper may be quite demanding for the very author of the scholarly work. Furthermore, and even more prosaically, we should consider that the limitations to the number of words a paper can contain in many scientific journals and other outlets are such that each and every word should be spent for maximising the chances of the paper 'surviving' the reviewing process: adding another section or even brief para of 'philosophical considerations' is practically highly disincentivised in contemporary PA scholarly conventions.

However, this dire state of affairs ought not to be taken as an immutable given, and initiatives can be taken to raise awareness about the

significance of making the philosophical standpoint underpinning a piece of research in PA more explicit (indeed, this is the rationale for and a goal of this book). Setting in motion a process for eliciting more awareness in the PA scholarly and practitioners' community about the significance of engaging with—or at least being explicit about—the philosophical underpinnings of research work may well occur, at different levels. One is the level of the 'epistemological culture', that is, instilling in the culture of the PA scholarly and practitioner community a sensitivity towards this issue, making it more culturally accepted that being explicit about the philosophical underpinnings of one's own work should not be seen as an 'additional task', rather as something that is simply part and parcel of the 'standards' of the scholarly work and the publishing conventions—in a logic of appropriateness framework: institutionalising it as part of the 'rules of the game' of producing research in the field.

Another level at which a process to raise awareness about the significance of making it explicit the philosophical standpoint underpinning a piece of research in PA is that of making this the goal of a deliberate research policy, which can focus on intervening on standards and conventions. For example, a number of PhD programmes in certain departments or schools that 'host' public administration scholarship, like a number of Business Schools in the UK, tend to demand that the philosophy of science (epistemology) adopted by the PhD student be made explicit in their thesis project, and this must occur since the early stages of the doctoral project. This requirement could be expanded in scope to demand that the PhD student considers more broadly the philosophical premises of their work—including, alongside epistemology, the ontological underpinnings or the political-philosophical premises (if pertinent depending on the thematic subject of the thesis project), or the ethical and axiological premises (if pertinent), and so forth. As another example, formats to be adopted in the submission to journals could demand that the submitted contribution not just reports in a dedicated methods section the underlying epistemology, but more broadly asking of authors to report on the underlying ontology, or political philosophy, or axiology as pertinent. In short, there are a number of phases in the knowledge production process on which it would be possible to intervene as part of a deliberate policy to integrate philosophy more systematically into PA.

But while the one depicted so far is a desirable scenario for the future development of the field of PA, for it to connect with philosophical knowledge in order to benefit of it, the question remains: what can be

done, here and now, for ‘unveiling’ the philosophical underpinnings of extant research works and publications in the field of PA? We suggest two main approaches can be delineated to this purpose: an interpretative perspective; and a bibliometric analysis. They are examined in turn in the next two sections.

MAPPING THE FIELD: INTERPRETATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Another approach—to which we refer as ‘interpretative perspective’—for unveiling the philosophical underpinnings of extant research works and publications in the field of PA is centred on detecting the philosophical influences on the PA literature as the resultant of an interpretation by other scholars of the philosophical underpinnings of a given PA publication or set of publications. We call this approach as ‘interpretative’ as it revolves around a second scholar ‘interpreting’ the work of a given PA scholar in terms of its philosophical underpinnings. It starts from the assumption that only rarely are the philosophical premises of PA works made explicit (see previous section), and hence someone needs to perform this task of ‘extrapolating’ the philosophical kernel in the extant publications across the PA literature (or at least, given the sheer number of scholarly works in the field, to glean such information out of a selection of the extant publications, seen as particularly significant or representative in some way).

An exemplar of such kind of analysis is Chapter 4 in the work by Riccucci (2010), who discusses the main philosophies of science in use in contemporary public administration (according to Riccucci’s interpretation) to then identify major strands of inquiry in an important topic in the field of PA—in Riccucci’s analysis, these are works focusing on the topic of representative bureaucracy, a significant area of scholarly interest in PA. Riccucci then classifies extant scholarly works according to the philosophy of science which is (implicitly) adopted by the given strand of inquiry. For each strand of inquiry, Riccucci plucks an exemplar of a PA work particularly representative of that strand of inquiry. So, Riccucci considers that the main philosophies of science in use in the field of contemporary scholarly PA are the following (see Riccucci, 2010, pp. 46–51 for definitions and details): (i) Interpretivism; (ii) Rationalism; (iii) Empiricism; (iv) Positivism; (v) Post-Positivism; and (vi) Postmodernism/Critical Theory. She then delineates the ontology, epistemology and key philosophers for each philosophy of science, as well as the methodology, methods and

recording techniques favoured by each of these philosophies of science. Riccucci then delineates the profiles of the strands of inquiry that study the topic of representative bureaucracy from the perspective of each of these philosophies. So, for example, legal studies on affirmative action and case studies on hiring and promotion practices substantiate the strand of inquiry on representative bureaucracy whose premises and underpinnings are in the philosophy of Interpretivism; research challenging the mainstream tenets or suppositions of representative bureaucracy as the chief tool for achieving multiculturalism embody the strand of inquiry on representative bureaucracy whose premises and underpinnings are in the philosophy of Postmodernism/Critical Theory; and so forth. For each strand, Riccucci then identifies a key PA publication which exemplifies the strand. In short, Riccucci's analysis provides an interpretation of the philosophical perspective underpinning each of the main strands of inquiry in the subfield of representative bureaucracy, as an important area of PA inquiry.

Another nice example of an interpretative approach to mapping backwards from a PA work to its philosophical underpinnings is provided by Di Nuoscio (2025), who employs Popper's epistemology to critically analyse a notable public administration work from a philosophical standpoint. Di Nuoscio revisits the key tenets of Popper's philosophy (of science), to then apply it to the 'case study' of scholar Sabino Cassese's analysis of the severe dysfunctions affecting the Italian administrative system, contained in his 'classic' work *Il sistema amministrativo Italiano* (The Italian administrative system—Cassese, 1983). Cassese is a renowned public administration scholar in Italy, and his analysis is a mainstay in the Italian scholarly debate. By utilising the Popperian conceptualisation of the notions of: 'problem', 'causality', 'nomological covering', 'explanation sketch', 'nomological common-sense knowledge', 'primacy of situational analysis' and 'principle of falsifiability/falsification', Di Nuoscio revisits and dissects the core 'components' of Cassese's argument about the dysfunctions of the Italian bureaucracy contained in his book. Di Nuoscio 'breaks down' the components of Cassese's administrative argument by deploying a Popperian framework of analysis and terminology, thereby providing an intriguing application of philosophy to public administration in the logic of backwards mapping.

The contribution by Di Nuoscio sheds light on why and how a philosophical perspective, 'always and necessarily', albeit most often implicitly, underpins any study of public administration, and the contribution that

such philosophical analyses can provide by elucidating the philosophical premises underpinning administrative analyses. More in detail, the work by Di Nuoscio discusses at first the rationale for choosing Popper's approach. For Popper (we here follow the structure of the argument as expounded in Di Nuoscio, 2025), problems, rather than 'academic' disciplines, come first: we (human beings) at first encounter a problem. In a Popperian perspective, a problem arises when 'there is a mismatch between an expectation and an observation—which then triggers the quest for new knowledge, which [in turn] arises within the horizon of expectations and the background knowledge of the individual. Observations, in turn, are aimed at solving these problems. An observation without a problem is epistemologically impossible, because without the values, knowledge, and interests of the individual, the world would be reduced to a senseless infinity' (Di Nuoscio, 2025).

The quest for new knowledge capable of addressing and solving an extant problem then triggers the hypothesis generation process which is at the roots of the theory-building and then theory testing process. Most famously, Popper introduced the principle of falsification, whereby a theory can only be deemed to be 'provisionally true', as a single contradictory fact is sufficient to establish its falsity (as Di Nuoscio, 2025, puts it: 'This reveals a logical asymmetry between the confirmation and refutation of a theory: however numerous, confirmations do not establish a theory's truth, whereas a single contradictory fact can, logically, demonstrate its falsity').

We can now turn to illustrating how Di Nuoscio deploys the Popperian conceptual apparatus—notably the notions of 'problem', 'causality' ('immediate' and 'remote' causes), 'nomological covering', 'explanation sketch', 'nomological common-sense knowledge', 'primacy of situational analysis' and (of course) 'principle of falsifiability', as defined within Popper's philosophy—to vet the structure of the argument of Cassese's (1983) study of the Italian administrative system (in his analysis, Di Nuoscio also assumes a principle of utility maximisation by individuals as rational actors, which he derives mostly from the works of Ludwig von Mises, and whose philosophical roots can be associated to the works of Jeremy Bentham and James and John Stuart Mill). Starting with the *problem* that Cassese identifies, this is framed in the terms of what he calls the 'endemic dysfunctions plaguing the Italian state administration' across key public functions and policy sectors, described through qualifications like the 'deterioration' and 'devaluation of public

functions', the 'difficulty in formulating and executing unified policies' (policy coordination), and the 'lengthening and slowing down of procedures' (inadequate response times to deliver public services—see Cassese, 1983, pp. 283–285).

To explain such dysfunctions, Cassese looks for *causality*, seeking to trace a causal chain starting from the immediate causes and extending back to more remote ones. Chief amongst the *immediate causes* is the lack of clear attribution of public functions to public offices, with resulting overlapping and intersecting functions, due to single tasks being split amongst multiple offices, as a main cause of the identified dysfunctions (Cassese, 1993, p. 274). To make sense of these dysfunctions, Cassese applies certain nomological rules (which Di Nuoscio, resorting to Popper's analytics, collectively qualifies as *nomological covering number one*), which 'can be made explicit as follows: (i) "The greater the number of actors involved, the harder it becomes to reach coherent decisions"; (ii) "As the number of decision-makers increases, so does the time required to make decisions"; (iii) "The less clearly competencies are defined among parties, the more overlaps, conflicts and uncertainties arise in action strategies". These 'covering laws' provide the necessary framework for Cassese to select causally relevant facts from countless possibilities, enabling him to pinpoint the specific factors underlying the dysfunctions in Italian public administration that he aims to explain' (Di Nuoscio, 2025).

Cassese's analysis then shifts to what Di Nuoscio qualifies as the *remote causes*, of which the immediate ones are, in turn, effects. These remote causes are sought in the administrative action of three entities: (a) the Parliament, which by treating administrative organisation as an area of secondary interest had *de facto* forfeited its responsibility to shape the organisational function of the Public Administration (Cassese, 1983, p. 279) and ultimately countenanced an opaque and ineffective organisational structure for the Italian public sector; (b) the Government, which also has forfeited its responsibility in effecting a coherent administrative reform policy (Cassese, 1983, p. 280); and (c) the administrative staff, and here Cassese deploys an argument much in line with the arguments developed by Niskanen (1973) and Dunleavy (1991)—albeit with a very different terminology and a different reference discipline, as Niskanen and Dunleavy resort to economics as the reference disciplinary perspective and proceed in a deductive way, while Cassese mostly resorts to administrative law, with some elements of the sociology of organisations, and frames his insights as 'rules of experience'. The argument lies

in attributing a bureau-shaping behaviour to the tenured officials (the bureaucrats), ultimately resulting in the dysfunctions identified as the problem. The analysis of these remote causes is also developed by working out certain nomological rules (*nomological covering number two*). And '[T]his causal imputation also relies on implicit "rules of experience." Causes (a) and (b) are identified through the following nomological insights: "whoever regards something as secondary will not give it special attention" and "without coordination of decisions, a coherent solution to a problem is unachievable". Cause (c), on the other hand, presupposes the principle: "in the absence of a party asserting a shared public interest, particularistic interests will dominate" (Di Nuoscio, 2025).

Di Nuoscio then further notices that Cassese's theorisation serves as an *explanation sketch*, that is, an argument in which the underlying 'covering laws' that explain the phenomenon are left implicit. The identification of immediate and remote causes rather occurs through 'nomological common-sense knowledge' (Weber, 1903/2012, p. 5), which, as Di Nuoscio notices, is 'described by Popper as "a-problematic" and "trivial"' [and] Although methodologically secondary, this nomological underpinning is logically essential for constructing the explanatory hypothesis, as without it, the identification of causal relations would be impossible' (Di Nuoscio, 2025, relying also on Di Nuoscio, 2003, pp.18ff).

Reliance on rules of experience brings with it notable challenges, though. The nomological covers identified this way may apply to a range of instances, but not to others. Rules such as 'without coordination of decisions, a coherent solution to a problem is unachievable' have been disproved (falsified) in a number of instances, as human history can provide plenty of evidence to the contrary (we can echo here Simon's point about the proverbs of administration, Simon, 1946). However, such 'rules' may be found to fit the specific circumstances under analysis (revealing their *ad hoc* nature). This can be referred to through the notion of the *primacy of situational analysis*. Faced with the potential for multiple explanations compatible with the situation to be explained, the researcher can only rely on what Popper calls 'situational analysis': the most precise possible reconstruction of the unique interweaving of typical aspects that, in the view of the researcher, constitutes the causal context generating the explanandum. A detailed situational analysis allows the researcher to progressively reduce the number of alternative explanations that, while compatible with the explanandum, are incompatible with each other (Di Nuoscio, 2018), which is what Cassese does in his analysis

here reported. In particular, Cassese applies a logic of utility maximisation to public employees, and he assumes that those who advanced the interests of public employees (including the trade unions) acted rationally from their viewpoint as utility maximisers by exploiting the favourable circumstance represented by the void left by parliament and governmental (non-) action.

Finally, as an outcome of his analysis, Cassese comes out with a theory about the causes of the administrative dysfunctions of the Italian administrative system (at least as it used to work in the early 1980s, when the analysis was developed). Such ‘theory’ can be submitted to the Popperian *principle of falsifiability*. In fact, Di Nuoscio observes:

Cassese’s proposal is an example of a theory that can be subjected to falsificationist criticism. The following two types of propositions can be empirically tested: i) those describing the explanandum: “the disqualification and deterioration [of functions], the high degree of interdependence of structures and the consequent difficulties in formulating and executing unitary policies, the constitution of coordinating bodies, the general lengthening and slowing down of procedures” (Cassese, 1993, p. 278) and ii) those describing the “initial conditions” – e.g. “norms with no apparent relationship, coming from heteroclite periods and sources, slide over each other and suddenly become immobilized in an organizational architecture whose design cannot be discerned” (Cassese, 1993, p. 279), “only the organization of five ministries is defined in general organizational acts of a normative nature [...] The organization of the other apparatus is regulated by multiple acts, codes and ministerial decrees that are added to each other in a disordered manner [...] As is evident, we are faced with empirically testable propositions, which may be contradicted by contrary facts (potential falsifiers) that, if identified by the scientific community, would lead to the falsification of the theory, thereby creating the conditions for the formulation of a new hypothesis that incorporates the new empirical evidence. (Di Nuoscio, 2025)

In sum, by providing a range of concepts and the terminology and then the application to the specific case example, in order to compare the underlying epistemological premises of Cassese’s administrative argument about the Italian administrative system with the underlying premises of alternative administrative arguments, Di Nuoscio (2025) aims at furnishing a more general method and framework of analysis that enables to ‘extrapolate’ the underlying epistemological premises of PA scholarly

works and compare the underlying structure of their arguments. The contribution by Di Nuoscio can therefore be seen as aimed at providing a framework and method for vetting the structure of administrative arguments as developed in the PA literature, to then compare them through a common conceptualisation and terminology in order to facilitate the establishment of a common ground for the critical discussion of administrative arguments (a similar thrust—but without any explicit reference to philosophy as the underlying discipline—can be found in Barzelay, 2001). Such framework as proposed by Di Nuoscio is based on a philosophical framing and a philosophical terminology, and it can therefore substantiate a structured approach to mapping backwards from a public administration work to its philosophical underpinnings and premises.

The main thrust of Di Nuoscio's account is working out the philosophical premises of a PA work, and it is therefore fitting that it is being presented in this chapter dedicated to backwards mapping. At the same time, Di Nuoscio also aims at introducing more systematically Popper's epistemology into PA studies, by working out a framework to be used for analysing and comparing PA studies, and in this sense, his work can also be seen as another example of mobilising philosophy for PA, which we have discussed widely in the dedicated Chapter 2 centred on the approach of 'philosophy for public administration' (specifically, in Di Nuoscio's contribution, philosophy performs two of the functions characterising its application to PA problems: the enlightening function as well as the critical function).

In concluding this section, we notice that the interpretative approach—which we have here seen applied mainly through the lens of the branch of epistemology—could be expanded to other areas of philosophy beyond epistemology.

MAPPING THE FIELD: BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSES

Philosophical influences on the PA literature can also be investigated via a different approach and method, namely through bibliometric analysis. In their work, Tang et al. (2025) scout the Web of Science database, one of the largest databases of scientific works (published in journal article format), to detect references to works that have been published in philosophy journals that are contained in all the PA journal articles that have been published during the period of observation.

Tang et al. (2025) have thus identified 58,633 PA journal articles published in the period from 1900 to 2022 (only original research articles and review articles were included), and their associated 2,246,146 references. During the same period, WoS indexed 563,237 philosophy journal articles (in the WoS journal categories of ‘philosophy’ or ‘ethics’). After checking for duplicates, they matched the 2,246,146 PA references against the 563,237 philosophy journal articles and obtained 3,548 PA journal articles (out of 58,633) influenced by philosophy, in the sense that they cite at least one article published in a philosophy journal (books or other outlets are not considered in the database).

Interestingly, while the above datum indicates that on average ca. 7% of PA articles cite (at least one) philosophy article, the authors detected a growing trend: while PA articles in the 1970s tended to very limitedly cite philosophy journals (only 0.9% of PA articles did so in 1970), a much larger share of ca. 14% of PA journal articles cite at least one article published in a philosophy journal in 2022. As the authors point out (Tang et al., 2025), this datum may point to an enhanced ‘absorption of philosophical knowledge’ into the field of PA, an upwards trend. Through additional investigation, the authors also find that PA research in the 1970s tended to cite books, government documents and other types of references that are not journal articles, while more recently published articles in the field of PA tend to cite other journal articles: this trend might therefore be seen as part of a ‘scientization’ of the PA field which—at least for research published in the form of journal article—tends to cite other journal articles, possibly seen as more ‘scientific’ than the grey literature which tended to be cited in the 1970s. To reiterate, there is evidence that over time PA journal articles more and more cite other journal articles rather than works published in other formats, which can explain the upwards trend of philosophy articles being cited by PA articles, as part of a general trend to PA articles more and more often citing other articles.

However, it is by far not a given—it is indeed quite surprising (positively surprising, from the viewpoint of this book aimed at bridging the fields of philosophy and PA)—that PA journal articles tend to cite more and more philosophy articles—better: that there are more and more PA articles referencing at least one philosophy article, both in absolute value and as a share of the total PA articles that are published every year. This is even more striking when zooming in on the trend over time: in fact, the authors found, 1.4% of PA journal articles published over the period 1970–1999 cited philosophy articles (at least one philosophy

article); 4.5% of PA articles published over the period 2000–2010 cite philosophy articles, and 11.3% of PA articles published over the period 2011–2022 cite philosophy articles, with a ‘striking’ ca. 14% of PA articles citing philosophy articles in the year 2022 (the last year for which this analysis was carried out). To further reinforce the contrast, in the period before 1970, that is (given the temporal scope of the WoS database), from the year 1900 to 1969, out of the 3,717 PA research articles that were published, merely four articles (four!) cite philosophy studies.

To better appreciate this evidence, Tang et al. (2025) also examine the number of PA journal articles citing articles from the ‘typical’ disciplinary fields underpinning PA studies, namely political science, economics, law and management (see, e.g., Rosenbloom et al., 2022). Not unexpectedly, PA journals tend to reference more often from these disciplines (next to referencing other PA journal articles, which represent the most cited category of articles) than from philosophy articles: in decreasing order, PA journal articles cite first of all other PA journal articles (over 90% of PA journal articles cite, not unexpectedly, at least one other PA journal article), then political science articles, then economics articles, then management articles, then law articles and finally philosophy articles. Therefore, while the ‘common wisdom’ appreciation that PA articles tend to tap knowledge from the other social sciences articles (and first and foremost, amongst the social sciences, from the ‘big four’ of political science, economics, management and law), and that PA articles tap knowledge first of all from previously published PA articles (as commonsensical), it is intriguing to notice that philosophical knowledge seems to have been on the rise as a source of reference in PA scholarly works published in the form of journal articles.

The authors then further analyse in which PA journals the most articles citing philosophy articles can be detected; not unexpectedly, the journal *Science and Public Policy* tops the ranking, with *Public Administration Review*, *Public Management Review* and *Administration and Society* as the next journals hosting the larger number of PA articles citing philosophy articles. They then examine which are the philosophy journals hosting the most philosophy articles being cited by articles published in PA journals; here too not unexpectedly philosophy and ethics journals concerned with the social sciences represent the primary sources: *Journal of Business Ethics* tops the ranking, with ‘purer’ philosophy journals like *Philosophy and Public Affairs* and *Journal of Political Philosophy* ranking in seventh and eighth position respectively. This finding suggests that the

share of PA articles drawing on philosophical knowledge *strictosensu* may be (much) smaller than PA journals drawing from philosophical knowledge *latosensu*, which includes the fields of ethics and the philosophy of science.

Another interesting finding provided by Tang et al. is that PA journal articles citing philosophy articles tend to garner more citations than PA articles not citing philosophy articles. This may be due to a number of reasons—and possibly this can be due simply to the fact that PA articles referencing philosophy articles are likely to touch on topics that elicit more interest from other researchers for the very subject they investigate. However, it is intriguing to consider that works that do draw from philosophy as one of their intellectual sources of knowledge and understanding of reality tend to be better positioned to also win the coveted prize (in the scholarly world) of attracting more citations!

Yet another finding by Tang et al. concerns the topics that are more frequently examined by PA articles which cite philosophical references contrasted with the topics of PA articles which do not cite philosophy articles: ‘wicked problems’ as well as problems pertaining to research and innovation top the ranking of PA articles which also draw from philosophy articles, while (interestingly) climate related issues top the ranking as the subject of PA articles which do not cite philosophy articles.

Before concluding this section, it is worth recalling a limitation of the work by Tang et al. (2025), work which provides an impressive and highly valuable and useful contribution for the purpose of connecting philosophy and PA. In fact, the bibliometric analysis carried out by Tang and Colleagues encompasses journal articles only, thereby leaving out works published in other formats. In the case of philosophy, the book format has historically been a privileged outlet for communication of the ‘findings’ of philosophical inquiry; this is especially so in the case of the ‘classics’ in philosophy, their work being often published in book format, but also contemporary philosophy prizes the book format to an extent that is not (anymore) appreciated in the social sciences (the book format used to be central also in PA studies in the past, but the trend to privilege journal articles, also driven by academic career patterns modeled on other social sciences like economics, has led to disparaging the book format in PA studies, unfortunately).

Summing up, the work by Tang et al. (2025) sheds light on the extent to which philosophical knowledge is ‘absorbed’ in PA scholarly works. While their findings point to philosophical studies being less drawn

upon than the social sciences in PA studies (not unexpectedly), they find, however, that tapping philosophical knowledge may be on the rise: it may be growing over time. They also show that the field of ethics may be the philosophical area most tapped in PA (again, not unexpectedly, given the significance of the topic of public ethics and related areas like anti-corruption and integrity of governance), thereby corroborating and underpinning with empirical evidence what may have been ‘common wisdom’ in this regard, yet previously undemonstrated.

More broadly, at the ‘meta-analysis’ level, the study by Tang et al. can be seen as path-making: it can open a path of inquiry which has in bibliometric methods the approach to survey and map the multiple interconnections between the fields of philosophy and PA respectively. Bibliometric approaches can enable to walk the road connecting these two fields of scholarly inquiry (a two-way road: not only PA tapping philosophical knowledge but also the other way around), for mutual benefit.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored the direction of inquiry for connecting philosophy and public administration that takes the move from the critical analysis of extant scientific works in the field of public administration, to then detect and trace back the philosophical premises and underpinnings of such works. We refer to this direction of inquiry as ‘backwards mapping’, because it moves from extant PA works ‘back’ to their philosophical ideational sources.

We propose and outline three ways in which backwards mapping may be performed: (i) by the very authors of the PA research, who make it explicit the philosophical underpinnings of their own work; (ii) by an ex post interpretation by a distinct 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 investigation via bibliometric analyses, of which there are many techniques and variants, with different specific foci and units of analysis—a powerful example of one such analysis being the study by Tang et al. (2025), who have looked into the references cited by the journal articles published in PA journals over the period 1900–2022.

Overall, these three suggested approaches may provide valuable tools to raise awareness of the philosophical underpinnings of PA scholarly

work, both retrospectively by investigating extant publications in the field of PA and tracing their philosophical premises, and prospectively by eliciting self-awareness as PA scholarship develops and traverses the challenging seas of the theory and practice of public governance and public administration worldwide.

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