



## CHAPTER 5

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# Philosophy of Public Administration

**Abstract** This chapter undertakes the task of defining and delineating the contours of a philosophy of public administration (PA) which may be fit for the problems and challenges of PA in the twenty-first century. Philosophy of PA is identified as a branch of philosophy which is derivative (i.e. it is grounded on foundational areas of philosophy, such as ontology or epistemology or political philosophy) and whose main task is elaborating the research questions in PA that are philosophical in nature, thereby outlining what is distinctively philosophical in PA problems and questions. It is further argued that a philosophy of PA may draw upon one very important strand of philosophical thinking in the Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophical tradition which has been fleshed out through very distinctive contributions provided by such philosophers like Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes and Giambattista Vico, who coined the expression ‘verum factum est’, that is, what is true in the social world is such because it has been made, we know it because we humans are its maker, we have made it and thereby we are the cause of it. This encapsulates the idea of a maker’s conception of philosophy, which is central to the philosophy of information theorised by Luciano Floridi and which can provide a valuable blueprint for working out a philosophy of PA.

**Keywords** Philosophy · Public administration · Philosophy of public administration · Administrative science · Administrative theory · Philosophical system

## INTRODUCTION, RATIONALE AND DEFINITION

This chapter addresses the direction of inquiry in the relationship between philosophy and PA which is possibly the most intellectually challenging, as well as fascinating, namely, defining and delineating the contours of what *a philosophy of public administration for the twenty-first century* may look like (to notice we use ‘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).

In a very schematic way, we may consider there are two main senses in which it can be spoken of a philosophy *of* PA:

- (i) Philosophy of PA as a ‘section’ of a broader philosophical system.
- (ii) Philosophy of PA as a dedicated philosophical elaboration.

Regarding the former sense in which it is possible to speak of a philosophy of PA, possibly the most notable example in (western) philosophy is the Philosopher Georg Wilhelm Hegel’s *Theory of Right*, which contains a section dedicated to PA (Paras 287–297) and more amply incorporates the study of bureaucracy and administration organically within the author’s broader philosophical system. We qualify this example (exemplar) as ‘notable’ for two reasons: due to the prominent standing of the German philosopher, as well as due to it being quite a rarity in the history of philosophy that a major philosophy book includes a section specifically dedicated to PA.

It is, however, in relation to the latter sense in which it is possible to speak of a philosophy of PA that this chapter unfolds: the contours of philosophy of PA as a dedicated philosophical elaboration (and not as a ‘section’ of a broader philosophical system) are outlined in this chapter, which is therefore centred on the profiling of what a philosophy of PA may look like as a dedicated intellectual enterprise for the needs of the contemporary epoch: a philosophy of PA for the twenty-first century.

The argument wrought out here is patterned on Floridi (2011 and 2019), whose framework to work out what he calls the philosophy of information—another ‘branch’ of philosophy very significant for addressing contemporary problems—is taken as a blueprint. There are two complementary reasons why Floridi’s philosophy of information and his approach to philosophical questioning is taken as a blueprint here.

The first reason is the sheer effectiveness and clarity of his elaboration of a branch of philosophy as such; the second and complementary reason is that the philosophy of information may be extremely pertinent for contemporary PA, for a philosophy of PA for the twenty-first century.

The latter point—that the philosophy of information may be a pertinent pattern for working out a philosophy of PA for the twenty-first century—can be argued on multiple grounds. Because, like philosophy of information, philosophy of PA is oriented to address socially and culturally contextual problems (PA as problem-driven). It is pertinent also because, here again akin to philosophy of information as conceptual design (see Floridi, 2019), PA is action-oriented—PA can be seen also as a profession and a *praxis* (Raadschelders, 2008), and hence a notion of philosophy as conceptual design may be an appropriate way of conceiving of philosophy of PA. Furthermore, because PA is part of the built/artificial environment, it is a human-made reality: hence the maker’s knowledge, the kind of knowledge that derives from being the maker, the ‘creator’ of something (a strand of philosophical thinking which has its roots in Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas and has been developed by philosophers such as Francis Bacon and Gianbattista Vico), as distinct from the kind of knowledge that derives from observing something (beholder’s knowledge), is a central way of knowing in and for PA, like it is in information, of which humans are co-producers (this resonates with the conception of PA as also ‘art’ as discussed in Chapter 1, see Bouckaert, 2025; de Graaf and van Asperen, 2025; Drechsler, 2025; Ongaro, 2025). Moreover, because PA is inherently concerned with ethical-moral issues, like philosophy of information is (Floridi, 2014). And last but not least, because the ‘information revolution’ is likely to continue to be a direct shaper of PA—the study, the profession, the art, the practice—in the twenty-first century (and likely beyond).

While our concern is with contemporary problems and contemporary applications of philosophical thinking, we would (dare to) argue that discussion of the following key conceptual components is part and parcel of any philosophy of PA (past, present and future). A philosophy of PA is grounded in performing the following conceptual functions:

- (i) appropriately categorising philosophy of PA as a branch within (the much broader field of) philosophy, notably noticing that Philosophy of PA is *philosophia secunda*, i.e. it is derivative, it is not a foundational area of philosophy (*philosophia prima*): it is grounded

on the main areas of philosophy, it relies on the key ‘findings’ (so to speak) of philosophical thinking and then applies it in a derivative way;

- (ii) elaborating on philosophy of PA as... philosophy proper, that is, characterized by the fact that it appropriates a specific *ti esti* (in ancient Greek) / *quid est* (in Latin), that is, a specific ‘what is’, a specific domain of reality; notably it does so by addressing in a philosophical manner the two defining issue of PA: what is ‘public(ness)’, and what is ‘administration’; as philosophy proper, philosophy of PA aspires to be an attractor of investigation, that is, it is a mediator of inquiry: it is a centre piece of intellectual investigation in order to be foundational to other and related intellectual efforts that rely on philosophical underpinnings; and it attracts, or at least facilitates and enriches, investigation in both the field of philosophy and the field of PA (in simple words: it is an intellectual effort that bears fruits—it is ‘fruitful’);
- (iii) elaborating the research questions (hereafter: RQs) in PA that are philosophical in nature, rather than addressable through social sciences methods, thereby outlining what is distinctively philosophical in PA problems and questions;
- (iv) working out a philosophical approach to enable addressing such RQs, to address those RQs in PA that are philosophical in nature.

The performance of the above conceptual functions is the *raison d'être* of a philosophy of PA, the hallmark of it being a philosophy proper. In fact, by performing the above functions a philosophy of PA can (i) situate itself within the broader field of philosophy; (ii) identify and define the domain of reality it addresses; (iii) identify the research questions in PA that are philosophical in nature, as distinct from those which are answerable via social (or other) science methods and approaches; and (iv) address, by the means and approaches proper of philosophy (Kenny, 2010, chapter 1), the research questions in PA that are philosophical in nature.

We can suggest a tentative *definition* of Philosophy of PA (again, patterned on Floridi's blueprint of the philosophy of information) as follows: ‘*a philosophical field concerned with the critical investigation of the*

*conceptual nature and key concepts and basic principles of public administration, including its science,<sup>1</sup> methods and problems – as well as the elaboration and application of theoretical concepts and practical problems of PA to philosophical problems’.*

The remainder of this chapter addresses the key building blocks of this conceptualisation of philosophy of PA.

## PHILOSOPHY OF PA AS *PHILOSOPHIA SECONDA*

We notice that philosophy of PA is *philosophia secunda* (Latin for: ‘second-order philosophy’): it is derivative, it is not a foundational area of philosophy like ontology, or epistemology, or moral or political philosophy—it is not a *philosophia prima* (foundational in nature). A philosophy of PA can only draw its concepts and the premises of its philosophising from the main areas of philosophy, on which it is grounded; its way of building arguments relies on philosophy *tout court*.

More specifically, philosophy of PA ‘mediates’ between areas of philosophy as *philosophia prima* (the basic branches of philosophy, such as: ontology; epistemology; moral philosophy and ethics; philosophy of mind; or the very philosophy of information we here use as a blueprint) and the field of PA. The notion of *philosophia secunda* means that philosophy of PA relies upon the concepts and notions of the key branches of *philosophia prima* (first order philosophy), it is anchored to the theorising and the very conceptual and noetic resources furnished by *philosophia prima* (‘noetic’ is a term originating in ancient Greek and amply used in philosophy, which can loosely be translated as ‘intellectual’, from the Greek *noein*, to think, and *nous*, mind, referring to the action of thinking and the mental act of intellection, and more broadly it can be used to mean the gaining of knowledge, wisdom, understanding).

To appreciate the significance of it, we may consider that, as a whole, philosophy of PA mediates between the field of philosophy and the field of PA. As a further qualification of this claim, it may be appreciated that philosophy of PA can mediate between specific branches of philosophy

<sup>1</sup> We should here specify that by ‘science’ in philosophy it is meant knowledge obtained through rigorous methods, knowledge that is grounded and can be claimed to be acquired with certainty. The term science does not refer here to a specific discipline (like any of the social sciences) which is defined having its object of investigation and problems formulated and unproblematically stated and its concepts and methods uncontroversially standardized.

and certain thematic areas in the field of PA which are more closely interlinked; so, for example, philosophy of PA can enable a better connection between: the field of philosophy of Information *and* the field of e-government and digital governance (considered as a field of PA); or between the field of philosophy of mind *and* the field of Behavioural Public Administration; or between moral philosophy and ethics *and* the thematic area studying street-level bureaucracy discretion and state-citizen interactions (Zacka, 2017); and so forth.

## PHILOSOPHY OF PA AS PHILOSOPHY PROPER

We have suggested above that, in order to be a philosophy proper, philosophy of PA has to appropriate a specific domain of reality, a defined ‘what is’. To this purpose, a philosophy of PA has to engage with issues of ontology (or, at least, with questions which are ontic in nature), i.e. it has to concern itself with addressing issues about the nature of the things it speaks about: what is a ‘public entity’; what is (public) ‘administration’; what is ‘publicness’ in public administration; and so forth.

One way of doing it is by addressing in a philosophical manner the two defining issue of PA: what is ‘public’, or better what is ‘publicness’, and what is ‘administration<sup>2</sup>’, and all the derivative of the root word: what is ‘administering’, what is ‘administrator’—and relatedly if one considers that we use the expression ‘PA’ to refer not only to public administration, but also to notions such as ‘public management’ or ‘public governance’: what is ‘management’, what is ‘managing’; and what is ‘governance’ and ‘governing’, and so forth (there is clearly more than just a flavour of analytical philosophy and the philosophy of language in this way of approaching the ontological question). The political philosophical and philosophy of law notions of public sphere, public space, public value (in the singular) and public values (plural), public purpose, legitimacy (and relatedly the notions of common good, social contract and social justice),

<sup>2</sup> The root word of the English language term ‘administration’ derives from the Latin word *ad*, which means ‘to’, and *ministrare*, which can be translated as ‘to provide service’, ‘to be at the service of’, yet more specifically the Latin root word for minister or ministering means (being) ‘minor’, (being) ‘less than’ (those who are served), hence *administration* as the act of being at the service of by operating from a position of inferiority towards what is being served, that is, the public.

legality, rights and duties (of the citizen and of the human being), ethicality and morality all pertain to defining issues of PA from a philosophical standpoint. It is the task of the (yet-to-be-worked out in full) philosophy of PA to be able to investigate philosophically the defining issues of PA.

The ontological grounding provided by a philosophy of PA must display (and the ‘success’ of a philosophy of PA to live up to what can be expected of it can be gauged against) the following properties:

- being ‘sufficiently’ portable, i.e. general enough to be applicable across the field’s sub-areas—for example, the ontological grounding of key issues around the nature of publicness of public administrations should be applicable to underpin the investigation of topics ranging from the sub-area of performance management in the public sector to that of the organisation of the public sector, and so forth;
- being scalable, i.e. the ‘solutions’ it generates continue to work and ‘hold’ also when the complexity or magnitude of the problem increases; and
- being interoperable across the field of PA, i.e. the capacity of an ontology to allow interactions between different theories (Floridi, 2011, Sect. 15.4 in particular—notice these concepts have been worked out borrowing from the vocabulary of computer science), even ‘distant’ ones.

A similar way of framing these properties is by asserting that a philosophy of PA must possess the extent, scope and width of a regional ontology. In fact, in terms of ontology, philosophy of PA can be seen as a regional ontology located within the realm of social ontology. Social ontology is a branch of ontology, a regional ontology whose focus is on the nature and foundations of *social entities* (‘the study of what sort of things exist in the social world and how they relate to each other’, Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 4). Philosophy of PA is an ontology which is concerned with the nature of PA entities and their relations (the word ‘structures’—PA entities and their structures—may also be used here). As a specific regional ontology, it posits minimal ontological commitment in terms of general ontology (e.g. it does not require to answer the ‘foundational’ ontological questions of, e.g. whether reality is monistic or dualistic or else; whether reality is material or ideal or informational or all of these; whether reality is ultimately

about objects and their properties as manifest to a knowing subject and/or it is about their relations/structures; and similar questions).

In terms of epistemology (in fact, a philosophy of PA has to concern itself with and engage in issue of epistemology: What can be known, and how?), a philosophy of PA demands the knowability of relations and/or the empirical manifestations of PA entities, but it can be quite agnostic and limitedly demanding from an epistemic viewpoint re the foundations of knowledge (whether in a realist or transcendental or constructivist or constructionist perspective, and so forth). Yet, crucially, a philosophy of PA must be productive: it must be fruitful, that is (as Floridi suggests it be the case for the philosophy of information he so decisively contributed to establish), it must be capable of addressing pressing, relevant, contemporary problems—it therefore must have a capacity of generating knowledge and understanding that would not otherwise be available without it (In simpler words: a philosophy of PA has to be able to make the difference in the knowledge and understanding of PA).

Another related feature for philosophy of PA to be a philosophy proper is for philosophy of PA to aspire to be an attractor of investigation; that is, it is a mediator of inquiry: it is a centrepiece of intellectual investigation, in order to be able to provide foundations for other intellectual efforts to build upon (or adopting a humbler and less ambitious characterisation, it must at least be sufficiently influential to withstand centrifugal forces, that is, to be relevant for intellectual inquiries in the field not to bypass it, or not entirely at least). Philosophy of PA must be able to attract, or at least facilitate and enrich, investigation in both the field of philosophy and the field of PA—it needs to be ‘fruitful’.

The characterisation provided so far of what a philosophy of PA should look like might seem quite formalistic-abstract: being about the formal properties and contours of a philosophy of PA. Yet philosophy has been made over the millennia by the work of Philosophers—real people who have made this inquiry into the most fundamental questions that human beings may ask. The reader might then rightly ask at this point to ‘name the names’: Which Philosophers may be an inspiration for working out the philosophy of PA?

This is of course no easy question, but we would like here to suggest one path. We argue that, in terms of ‘broad strands’ of philosophy, any future philosophy of PA may draw upon, and owe much to, one very important strand of philosophical thinking, which may be qualified as ‘a

maker's conception of philosophy'. This strand lies in the Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophical tradition and it has been fleshed out through very distinctive contributions provided by such philosophers like Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes and, crucially, Giambattista Vico, who coined the expression *verum factum est*, that is, what is true in the social world is such because it has been made, we know it because we are its maker, we have made it and thereby we are the cause of it. This encapsulates the idea of a maker's conception of philosophy. It is an approach recently revitalised by Luciano Floridi (whose work is yet again employed as blueprint), who has developed a constructionist (not constructivist) notion of philosophy as conceptual design (Floridi, 2019), a philosophical perspective which may provide a pathway for grounding a philosophy of PA for the twenty-first century, the century of the information age.

## TOWARDS A SYSTEM OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION THAT ARE PHILOSOPHICAL IN NATURE

Delineating a philosophy of PA entails shifting the focus of the analysis from research questions (RQs) which are 'social scientific' in kind, i.e. they can be addressed (answered) through social science contents and methods, and towards questions which are philosophical in kind. The first key task for a philosophy of PA is therefore to clarify what are philosophical questions.

In order to be philosophical, questions—and therefore the philosophical questions of a philosophy of PA: the 'PA philosophy questions'—should possess the following features (Floridi, 2019, chapter 1):

- being *open* to informed, rational and honest disagreement;
- being *ultimate, but not absolute*;
- being *closed under further questioning*;
- being *constrained by empirical and logical-mathematical reasoning but requiring noetic resources to be answered*.

These features are here discussed. First, philosophical questions are *open* to informed, rational and honest disagreement. This definition can be appreciated by contrasting it with social scientific research (in PA as elsewhere) which—in principle at least—aims for the attainment of answers that are 'closed', in the sense that they are answered exhaustively and

thence there is no need to further investigate such questions (however infrequent this may happen to be in the practice in PA research, this is the ambition of social sciences, like any sciences: to ‘close’ the question by exhaustively answering it). As Floridi phrases this point: ‘What I am suggesting is that empirical and logico-mathematical questions are such that, once we have the necessary and sufficient resources to formulate a correct answer, any further disagreement on that formulated answer may speak volumes about the parties involved but says nothing about the answer itself’ (Floridi, 2019, p. 8). By contrast, being philosophical, PA philosophical questions remain open, which does not mean they cannot and indeed should not be answered, but it is their inherent nature (so to speak) that any answer remains open to informed, rational and honest disagreement (see more broadly Floridi, 2019, chapter 1, for a dissection of the features open questions possess, and a critical discussion to a range of possible objections).

An example here will suffice: the author of this book was graciously invited to join a research programme lasted over many years investigating the features displayed by ‘public agencies’, defined as semi-autonomous organisations carrying out public tasks. The overarching goal of the research programme was to study public agencies in European countries as well as at the European Union level level, and investigate empirically and conceptually their relative autonomy from their parent organisation and the way in which they are steered and controlled and held accountable, as well as the way in which they form their own (constrained) strategy and the ways in which they participate to the public policy process (this research produced countless publications—for an overview and a thoughtful compendium of some of the main findings, see Verhoest et al., 2012). The reader may well imagine the innumerable hours discussing what is ‘public’ in and of a public agency, the question of what makes an organisation ‘public’. However, in hindsight we (or at least I) may have been too shy and reluctant in fully engaging with the underlying issue of the notion of publicness: if there is one area in which this otherwise so comprehensive research programme might have gone further is in revisiting the political-philosophical debate on publicness and private-ness—what is public and what is private and where one sphere ends and the other begins (for a composite review of this notion by PA academics for application to PA problems and issues, see Whetsell et al., 2025).

Philosophy would have helped this research programme. The issue of ‘publicness’ (and its complementary notion of ‘privateness’) is an

intellectual issue with a very long history of being debated in philosophy, both in the West and in the East. By way of hinting to the complexity and articulation of the philosophical debate, Plato's famous—and provocative—approach consists in suppressing the private interest (and the private dimension *tout court*) almost entirely, as suggested in his work *The Republic* in which he puts in the mouth of the character Socrates (generally representing Plato's view in his dialogues) the controversial proposal—the 'noble lie'—of telling everyone in the city (the political community in ancient Greece) that they were born not from their parents but by the land and earth of their city, who is therefore mother of all, de facto abolishing the institution of the family altogether (hence de facto suppressing almost entirely the private dimension of its citizens) and raising the children and looking after the elders in a totally communitarian way; as a consequence, the rulers and the guardians of the city will treat the elders (who may be their parents) or the young (who may be their children) as if they were their parents or children (and indeed such they might be), so that that rulers cannot favour their own kins (the 'private interest') and rather they will be restrained in how they treat everyone else by the fear of disfavouring their very own ancestors or progeny. Yet western philosophical thinking, or at least the main strands of liberalism as they have developed in the West, have not followed this route, rather have settled on dealing with the issue of defining the private (sphere) and the public (sphere) by means of drawing a clear, neat distinction if not outright separation between the public and the private, in the direction of demarcating and separating the two as much as possible, also as an intellectual strategy to deal with the conflicts that may arise between the two—and when conflicts arise, a more prevailing thrust in western liberal thinking has been to protect the private as much as possible from the public 'intruding' into it. Other western political philosophies, like Marxism, have proceeded the other way around while yet others philosophical streams, quite distinct and in other regards different between them, like traditional Republicanism or Christian Personalism, have focused more on a harmonious combination or even (moderate) fusion between the two, whereby the cultivation of both private and public virtues (ultimately virtues *tout court*) is indispensable and mutually reinforcing to protect both the public and the private sphere, and ultimately for the betterment of society. All of these philosophies, however, tend to assume a demarcation between the public and the private.

In the East, the issue of what is public (public sphere, public interest) and what is private has been dealt with differently. Notable is the Confucian view whereby the private and the public are seen as part of a continuum, rather than being neatly distinguished, with hierarchisation of one's duties as the intellectual strategy to deal with conflicts that arise between the private and the public sphere: the 'Confucian continuum and harmony model', as Bai (2020, p. 138) calls it, is an intellectual framework within which solutions on how to harmonise the public and the private are found to be contextual rather than generally applicable (thereby also entailing a risk of contextualism and ad hoc-only and patchy solutions). It is however important to notice the pluralism of strands of thinking in Chinese philosophical debate, whereby other political philosophers, notably Han Fei Zi, sharply and eloquently argued (against Confucius and Mencius) that the public and the private are fundamentally in contrast, thereby entailing that the private interest will inevitably prevail, unless laws can be formulated and enforced to constrain humans' behaviours (a thinking much in line with, in western political philosophy, Thomas Hobbes's thinking about the state of nature in which human beings are a threat to each other—*homo homini lupus* ('the human being is like a wolf to fellow human beings')—and the 'Leviathan' state becomes a necessary evil to stem human wicked and malevolent inclinations). Yet other intellectual traditions may be evoked to shed light (or perhaps enhance the confusion given the wide range of viewpoints) on the issue of the nature of publicness, like the Islamic intellectual elaboration, which emphasises the primacy of the public dimension to a larger extent than can be found in other religious-philosophical and intellectual traditions, whether Christianity, Confucianism or Buddhism or others.<sup>3</sup>

The moral of the story of our brief excursus into the philosophical treatment of the issue of the nature of publicness is that in order to root 'standard social science research' in PA—like the investigation of public agencies—it is necessary to also address foundational questions about the nature of public agencies, notably what is meant by their 'publicness'

<sup>3</sup> Incidentally, we may also notice that PA scholarly work properly referencing and elaborating upon the work of philosophy scholarship may help build true interdisciplinarity, by showing how PA scholars recognise the contribution of other disciplines, notably in philosophy, and can therefore help make this a two-way street, as philosophy-informed PA studies may be structured in such way that they may also inform philosophical investigation.

and what it implies for their operations. This example illustrates how PA philosophical questions are part and parcel of PA scholarly inquiry. It also indicates the sense in which they possess the feature of being open to informed, rational and honest disagreement (we have seen the different conceptions of the public-private relationship that have been elaborated over the millennia in philosophical thinking).

The second feature of PA philosophical questions is that they are *ultimate, but not absolute*. They are ultimate in the sense that they go to the roots of a(ny) PA problem (otherwise they wouldn't be philosophical), but they are not absolute because they are pitched at a specific level of abstraction (on the methods of the level of abstraction, see Floridi, 2011), i.e. they do not apply irrespectively of the level of granularity or detail at which they are pitched. An important qualification here is that, being philosophy of PA a *philosophia secunda* (as we have seen above, and unlike philosophy of information which aims to be *philosophia prima*), philosophical questions in PA are ultimate for (in relation to) PA problems, they are not (or at least they may not necessarily be) ultimate from the perspective of a *philosophia prima* (they are roots questions for PA, but they may be closer to the branches and leaves rather than the roots when seen from the perspective of a *philosophia prima*: in the example we have seen of public agencies, it is addressed the question of what is the publicness of public agencies: this is an ultimate question for PA, yet not necessarily ultimate nor, especially, absolute, for the broader philosophical debate of the nature of publicness and privateness and their relationship as such, when considered across all the domains of human life and not just in relation to public agencies).

Third, PA philosophical questions are *closed under further questioning*, in the sense specified by Floridi (2019) that they are at the roots of concatenations of questions: answering ultimate questions leads to answering a range of concatenated lower level questions, but lower level questions trigger further questions, while questions closed under further questioning, if and when answered, do not trigger further questions at the same level.

Fourth, PA philosophical questions are *constrained by empirical and logical-mathematical reasoning but requiring noetic resources to be answered*, that is, requiring distinctive purely intellectual-philosophical—as opposed to empirical—resources. In other words, they cannot be answered either by empirical investigation or by logical-mathematical analysis only: they are (also) a matter of informed exchange of rational

arguments (Floridi, 2011, chapter 2 and 15). As in the example of what makes a public agency ‘public’, this question cannot be answered only on empirical ground (although the answer may well be informed also by empirical findings), nor is it frameable in a purely logical-mathematical way—it requires noetic resources and can only be addressed via informed exchanges of rational arguments.

It is beyond the reach of this chapter to work out a system of inter-related PA philosophical questions. Elaborating in full a system of inter-related philosophical questions would be tantamount to fully fleshing out a (or perhaps even *the*) philosophy of PA for the twenty-first century—a task for another book (as such task can only be fulfilled through a wide-scope, systematic, book-length dedicated work, delving into foundational philosophical problems and informed by philosophical process). In line with the purpose and thrust of this book, namely delineating directions of inquiry for connecting the fields of philosophy and the field of PA, we here only recall what the defining features of PA philosophical questions are: being open, ultimate, closed under further questioning at least at the level of a *philosophia secunda*, and requiring noetic resources—as we have seen above.

We can also here briefly point to some aspects of the form such questions can take: being philosophical, they will investigate issues of essence or nature of things, ontological and foundational ‘what is’ type of questions about PA entities, relations and structures. Alongside being about the ‘formal causes’ (to borrow from Aristotle’s terminology and system of the four causes, see chapter 1), they will probe the rationale of PA-entities, they will take the form of ‘why’ questions and be about the ‘final causes’ of PA entities. They will be questions linking PA to thematic areas of *philosophia prima*, like ontology, epistemology, philosophical anthropology, ethics and axiology, political philosophy, as well as newer branches of *philosophia prima* like philosophy of information. Other, distinct yet related, PA Philosophical questions will be about epistemology of PA: What can we know in PA? And how can we know? Intriguingly, since the very process of generating novel knowledge creates new ‘facts’, as acutely argued by Bouckaert (2020b, p. viii), we may also evoke (albeit in a metaphorical sense rather than in an ontological sense strictly meant) the perspective of causative epistemology (à la Meister Eckhart, see Griffionen 2023, Sect. 6.2 in particular) to make sense of how ‘PA entities’ get to be known and thence become part and parcel of PA and its philosophy (Bouckaert, 2020b).

Yet other PA philosophical questions will be about individual freedom and social agency in relation to bureaucratic discretion and decision-making (see the discussion of Hegel's and Weber's conceptions of freedom and bureaucracy outlined by Tijsterman & Overeem, 2008, and the significance of a relational conception of freedom for an understanding of the foundations of processes of co-creation of public value discussed by Ongaro et al., 2025b—we have reported on both works in Chapter 2). Yet other and interconnected PA philosophical questions will revolve around normative issues along the perspectives of the branches of philosophy of axiology, ethics and morality—questions of ‘what should I do?’ and relatedly: ‘What can I hope?’ as it comes to individual’s obligations and expectations in relation to the public sphere, thus, within the realm of the philosophy of PA: What should civil servants do? What are duties and obligations of public officials? What is ‘good’ public governance? And what can we hope for (rather than despair)? Addressing such questions will involve political-philosophical questions of ‘how to live well together?’ and notably the PA-related question of how the public sector ‘ought to’ be reformed so as to contribute to bettering our living together in politico-administrative communities as human beings and so forth.

## APPLICATIONS OF A PHILOSOPHY OF PA AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have here sketched the contours of what a philosophy of PA may look like. Once a philosophy of PA will have been fully developed—a big task ahead—it will complement and supplement, by providing its roots and foundational elements, the social scientific study of PA (Van Thiel, 2014) as well as the practice of it, the practice of PA as a profession, as an art, and as a form of practical humanism (see Chapter 1 and Ongaro, 2020). This task of delineating the profile of the philosophy of PA will be open-ended, both conceptually, that is, open to informed, rational and honest disagreement which will lead to it being dialectically redefined, and temporally, that is, open to be continuously adapted to the evolving circumstances, to make the philosophy of PA a living body of understanding and knowledge fit for the contemporary challenges. Ultimately, the very philosophy of PA that will be elaborated will have to be continuously adjusted and adapted via philosophical querying.

The elaboration of a philosophy *of* PA may enable revisiting the thought of some of the more ‘philosophically-minded’ scholars of PA, like

Dwight Waldo, whose work can also be read as an investigation into the conceptual nature and key concepts and basic principles of public administration (i.e.: publicness, in all its declensions; administration, in all its declensions). The working out of a philosophy of PA for the twenty-first century may also enable to revisit in a more systematic way the thought of the intellectual founding fathers of PA—a long list including Confucius, Hegel, Nizām al-Mulk, Waldo, Weber, Wolff, *inter alia*—and rediscover the philosophical elements there—for example, the ‘Socratic’ element contained into Waldo’s scholarly work (Overeem, 2025).

Once fully developed, a philosophy of PA will enable to address such PA philosophical questions in relation to the PA problems and themes which are relevant and salient for the twenty-first century, in order to support the development of PA (referring here both to the field of study of PA and the practice of it). A philosophy of PA for the twenty-first century will thus enable to shed light on the assumptions and premises of PA (enlightening function of philosophy applied to PA); to critically revisit such assumptions and premises (critical function); to provide constructs and approaches to fill, at least partly, the gaps in PA assumptions, notions and theories (gap filling function); to facilitate the integration of the multiple disciplinary perspectives that are employed to address public administration problems and themes, also by shedding light on the philosophical residue inherent in each discipline as applied to PA (integrative function); and to provide rationales for prescriptive arguments about how the public sector ought to be organised or reorganised (the normative function of philosophy applied to PA).

Finally, we can also ask if and how the elaboration of a philosophy of PA can provide an entry point also for the field of PA to inform, or at least stimulate, the revisiting of issues in the (academic) field of philosophy, that is, alongside the direction from philosophy to PA—central to this book—also the direction from PA to philosophy, we argue, could be a fruitful direction of inquiry. A philosophy of PA should ‘feed into’ philosophy *tout court*, or at least certain areas of philosophy like political philosophy or public ethics. We have kept this element into the very definition of philosophy of PA where we complete our definition of philosophy of PA by indicating at the end of its definition: ‘*as well as the elaboration and application of theoretical concepts and practical problems of PA to philosophical problems*’ (we recall the definition of philosophy of PA, introduced above: ‘a philosophical field concerned with the critical investigation of the conceptual nature and key concepts and basic principles of public

administration, including its science, methods and problems – as well as the elaboration and application of theoretical concepts and practical problems of PA to philosophical problems'). We deem this qualification to be part and parcel of the very definition of philosophy of PA, to be constitutive of it. Indeed, as the saying goes that 'when parents beget children, then also the parents change', such metaphor may well apply here: when the field of philosophy begets (the specific subfield of) the philosophy of PA, then also philosophy, as its parent, changes, at least a bit.

The intellectual journey of this book has led us to cross four bridges connecting philosophy and PA. The first bridge we have crossed is the direction of inquiry of philosophy *for* PA, whereby philosophies and philosophical streams get mobilised and employed, individually or in a combined way, for complementing and supplementing knowledge and understanding of PA. The second bridge has led us to walk the opposite direction, proceeding backwards by tracing the philosophical roots of the extant scientific works in the field of public administration, to unveil their underlying philosophical premises and underpinnings. Walking through the third bridge has enabled to address the issue of the alignment between administrative doctrines ('prescriptions' for reforming the public sector) and their ideational bases, which are inherently philosophical. Finally, in the most classic 'last but not least', the fourth bridge—which is yet to be fully built, but the bridgehead has hopefully been positioned in this chapter—has brought us towards the delineation of the contours of a philosophy *of* PA for the twenty-first century.

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