Foreword

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According to the German philosopher Kant (1724–1804), there are three key questions to ask when one is approaching reality: (1) what can we know?; (2) what must we do?; and (3) what may we hope for?

These three questions have a fundamental relevance for Public Administration (PA) in general, but for the bridging of PA and Philosophy in particular.

WHAT CAN WE KNOW?

Whatever the definitions of PA, or its status in the academic field (as a science, an art, or a practical profession), there is a need to work with ‘facts’ of a ‘reality’, and there is a need to know these ‘facts’ and this reality. This helps to classify three categories: the known known, the known unknown, and the unknown unknown. For a practical reform agenda it is useful to have a systematic knowledge on what we know in the field of public administration, on, for example, what works and what doesn’t, where and when, and why. For a future academic research agenda it is essential, starting with an inventory of the known known, to know the unknown. It could help mapping a research strategy, define coherent knowledge consortia, or determine knowledge progress or coverage. A major problem is the category of the unknown unknown. Here, we suddenly will realize that we were not aware of the relevance of something and of our lack of knowledge on that very issue, e.g. global warming. Whatever knowledge we have, it should be rigorous and ultimately relevant.

Defining a PA-fact, which then becomes an element of a question to be studied and answered, is not so easy. In studying ‘PA reform’, there are four levels of ‘facts’ which could be relevant: Green and White Papers or Government Declarations announcements which are intentions; the related legislation as laws, decrees, or regulations; the implementations of the decisions; the reformed status as an effect. All four categories of facts are crucial, and one cannot be assumed or derived from the other. In

literature this set is referred to as Talk/Decision/Practice/Results (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017). In studying ‘trust’, a similar problem emerges to find out what kind of fact needs to be investigated or observed, assuming this is possible.

There is also an interesting shift in defining useful ‘PA-facts’ for research or practice. Shifting from data, to large data, to ‘big data’ changes the position and nature of inductive and data-driven research. ‘PA-facts’ also become increasingly varied: from countable objects to expectations, perceptions, and opinions which become ‘facts’ just by mapping them. It results in trade-offs, balances, limits, dilemmas, contradictions, and paradoxes in describing realities. A final new type of ‘PA-fact’ are experiments which could be lab, field, or survey based. A virtual and experimental ‘fact’ is created. All this puts pressure or at least requires qualifications for ‘evidence’-based research and practice.

A key question is not only what a PA-fact is (ontology), but also how we can know this PA-fact. This is the PA-epistemology. There are about five major positions and scientific logics with immediate implications for research methodologies.

A scientific orthodox approach takes a physicalistic model with statistical testing of causal hypotheses between independent and dependent variables, as derived from theories. A radical constructivist position explores inductively multiple and socially constructed meanings by interpreting language and text, sometimes within an egalitarian and participatory framework. Critical realism prefers thick descriptions within broad theoretical or conceptual frameworks and looks for explanations of how key processes operate within specified contexts to produce a particular result. These three epistemological paradigms do not include a closed mathematical and algebraic model where an optimal position can be calculated as a unique solution in full certainty. Nor does it include a totally open and chaotic model, even wicked model, where there is non-certainty on variables, data, actors, and dynamics. These five paradigms represent five totally different philosophical frames.

The definition of the substance of a PA-fact – its ontological status – is a crucial philosophical choice. The derived method used to get to know this PA-fact is based on a crucial epistemological position taken vis-à-vis ‘PA-reality’. Both philosophical ‘knowledge’ questions remain too easily unanswered or become conveniently implicit. However, it is necessary to answer them explicitly. The difference between ‘belief’ and ‘science’ is that ‘to believe’ is ‘to know without facts’, and ‘science’ is ‘to know with facts’. Even if PA is also practice and art, as a science we need to know with facts.

WHAT MUST WE DO?

The question about what to do is relevant for scientists (what to research and how) and obviously for practice. There is a need for social sciences – all sciences that are related to behaviour of individuals and societies – to describe, to explain and sometimes to predict. From a philosophical point of view, this requires different frames for different purposes. ‘To describe’ requires ontology (what is a substantial fact) and epistemology (how can we know it). ‘To explain’ facts and dynamic realities is important to know what we must do. It requires a philosophical stand, based on the five positions mentioned earlier. ‘To predict’ implies a vision on future realities based on causal mechanisms that think from ‘alpha’ to ‘omega’ in terms of trajectories, scenarios, . . . The other way around is also a possibility, from ‘omega’ to ‘alpha’, where an ideal future position, sometimes ideologically defined, is proposed. ‘Utopias’ could fit in this category. This requires a normative and ethical view on the futures.

It seems that there are three major sources for PA-reform: imitation, ideology and evidence. They have three different sources of philosophical frames. Imitation, or ‘copy pasting’ is a mnemonic mechanism that assumes a world where everything is ‘most equal’ and not ‘most different’. Practice demonstrates that ‘copy–paste’ types of behaviour are not very successful. Culture and religion do make a difference. A combination of too-Western PA, based on too-Western philosophies, for example utilitarianism, are not always, or even always not, travelling well. There is a need to have PA-communities according to different cultural communities, such as, for example, Islamic PA, Confucian PA, African PA, Latin American PA, or North American PA. Ideology, as a coherent set of values, is based on social and political philosophies. Evidence-based reform follows a rational model, sometimes combined with (American) ‘pragmatism’ as its philosophical approach.

In answering the question of ‘what to do’, two major logics have been developed: a to-do logic of consequences and a to-do logic of appropriateness. Both logics are in tension and have a very different philosophical underpinning.

First of all, there is the philosophical study of ‘logic’ as such, as (mathematical) syllogisms. This meta-study is also crucial in research design. Logics of consequences look at, mostly from a utilitarian philosophical framework, the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of how resources are turned into outcomes. Logics of appropriateness refer to, from an ethical philosophical framework, values, transparency, legitimacy, inclusion, openness, etc.

A major challenge is to handle the tension between these two logics

and to marry them. One crucial vector that both logics may share is 'trust'. A solid logic of consequences may result in trusting the economic, efficient and effective coherence of resources and outcomes. A solid logic of appropriateness may result in trusting the system and its functioning. 'Trust' could bring both logics together; however, this adds even more to the complexity of 'trust'. This brings us to the last question.

WHAT MAY WE HOPE FOR?

This is probably the most ideological and value-driven question. It is an essential philosophical question with a significant PA-dimension. It is about the common denominator of qualifications such as 'good/better/best', 'improved' or 'progress'. It is ultimately about, for example, what 'good' means in 'Good Governance' or what 'best' means in 'best practice'. It ultimately is about the 'Common Good'.

Increasingly there is also a converging or even shared view on what we may hope for. The acceptance, at least at the UN/ECOSOC-level of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) is a very visible answer to the question of what we may hope for. It is also clear that PA will be crucial to make that happen.

IN CONCLUSION

To give a substantial answer to the three PA-questions of what we can know, what we should do and what we may hope for, this book gives an indispensable and substantial contribution of a solid bridge between philosophy and PA. Since this bridge did not exist yet, Ongaro had to write this book.

REFERENCES

Pollitt C. and Bouckaert G. (2017) *Public Management Reform: A Comparative Analysis – Into the Age of Austerity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.