10. Researching and teaching philosophy for public administration

INTRODUCTION

This final chapter addresses the key issue of ‘what next?’ after having introduced and worked out a philosophical perspective to PA, and it tackles two key issues: first, how to advance the researching of philosophy for PA; second, how to introduce philosophy for PA into the teaching and learning of PA, that is, into teaching curricula at higher education level. The chapter then turns to briefly discuss the challenges posed by new technologies and the new media to PA and indicates how taking a broad philosophical perspective may be a vantage point to look at these challenges. Finally, the chapter wraps up on the journey made and returns to the main argument of this book: the enduring contribution that philosophical thought may provide to PA.

RESEARCHING PHILOSOPHY FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

We have argued throughout the book, and notably in Chapter 9, that philosophical thought may better equip public administrators and scholars of PA alike to face the challenges of the 21st century. Bringing philosophy into public administration (better: bringing back philosophy into public administration, as it originally was in scholars like Weber or Waldo) may trigger and enable new paths of research. It is to this task that the present section is devoted: outlining possible paths (pathways) for the development of research work aimed at bringing philosophical knowledge into public administration.

The core argument throughout this book is that PA may benefit from adding philosophy to its constituent disciplines (although strictly speaking philosophy is not a ‘discipline’ in the sense modern disciplines are, rather it is a body of knowledge and understanding about reality as such, built upon the attempts made by philosophers over the millennia to gain a better comprehension of reality – as discussed in Chapter 1). This section outlines some ways in which research work can be carried out to bring more systematically philosophical knowledge into PA, and hence improve our understanding of the field.
Based on the conceptualisation introduced in Chapter 1, we identify four approaches, or ‘strategies’, to more systematically bring philosophical knowledge and understanding into the field of public administration and public governance, with the ultimate purpose to inform research developments and advance knowledge of the field. We call these approaches:

- **Mapping Backwards from PA towards philosophy** – it is based on surveying the field of public administration to detect and unearth the underpinning philosophical stances in the PA scholarship.
- **Going Foundational** – it is centred on proposing new conceptions of public governance and administration by taking the move from an explicit ontology or political philosophy: it coincides with working out one’s own philosophical foundations upon which to build up new perspectives to PA: it is *philosophy of PA* as delineated in Chapter 1.
- **Revisiting Selectively** – by focusing key topics of contemporary significance for PA and inquiring into them from a philosophical standpoint – it is an approach somehow in-between philosophy of PA and philosophy for PA.
- **Philosophising Systematically**: applying in as much a systematic way as possible philosophical thought to PA with the purpose of building up the edifice of *philosophy for PA* (this is the overarching approach and thrust of this book).

These approaches are elaborated and illustrated in turn. As noticed in Chapter 1, this book must be placed in the fourth approach – *Philosophising Systematically / Developing Philosophy for PA* – where its overall thrust lies. However, hopefully, the review of philosophical thought for PA carried out throughout the pages of this book may also be helpful to those engaged in any of the other three approaches that we here delineate, and which we review first, before returning to the ‘philosophy for PA’ approach of the present book.

The first approach, which we label ‘**Mapping Backwards**’, consists of surveying the field of PA, for example by reviewing strands of literature according to the topic or the geographical area (so, ‘European’, or ‘US’, or ‘Chinese’ PA research), with the purpose of detecting and mapping the implicit or explicit philosophical underpinnings contained in the PA debates. To illustrate in more operational terms, this could occur by scouting the publications appearing in the scientific journals currently ranked in the ISI-Thomson index under the category ‘Public Administration’ and querying, with a defined grid which may then interactively evolve, certain key implicit philosophical assumptions contained in the publications. The rationale of this approach is to unveil and make it more explicit the very often implicit assumptions that guide researchers in the field of PA.
To make an example that draws from the topic discussed in Chapter 5, an application of this approach would lie in questioning what are the legitimacy underpinnings of propounded reform models like the New Public Management, the New Public Governance, the Neo-Weberian State, the Stewardship model, the New Public Service, or any other body of doctrines about how the public sector ought to be organised, that has been proposed and codified in the literature; that is, to discuss the justification that makes a reform of public governance ‘legitimate’, be it in terms of the common good approach originally worked out by Plato, or the social contract arguments in the line of Rousseau and other ‘liberal’ philosophers, or the philosophy of social justice promoted by Rawls. We have argued in Chapter 5 that asking these questions is not otiose: quite conversely, such questions may enlighten the public governance and public management reform discourse. As another example, it may be considered the implications for public administration studies of revisiting certain foundational issues lying in the very notion of ‘time’ as it has been debated in philosophical thought (see Chapter 4).

This first approach, or research strategy, to bringing philosophical notions into PA thus lies in revisiting the extant scientific or grey literature in PA to shed light on otherwise overlooked aspects and implications of the ways in which administrative phenomena are studied, and interpretations and meanings are given. A wide range of other ontological issues might, in a similar way, be introduced into the picture: these issues range from the conception of the human nature to ontological notions of ‘social structures’ or of ‘essence’ of things, and so forth. This way, philosophical thought may be brought into the framework of analysis and enable exploring profiles so far under-investigated or outright ignored.

A possible second line of development in bringing philosophy to the fore into public administration is what we have called ‘Going Foundational’. In this perspective, philosophy and the philosophical stance become the starting point, and new conceptions of public governance or the public administrative dimension are proposed by taking the move from philosophical stances and ontologies. This approach is the ‘Philosophy of PA approach’, in the sense that scholars engaged in this intellectual path aim at working out their own philosophical interpretation of public governance, or of certain aspects or dimensions of it (we have examined the difference between philosophy for PA and philosophy of PA in Chapter 1). An example is the work by Stout and Love (2019), who have wrought out an outright ‘manifesto for integrative governance’, predicated on process philosophy à la Whitehead and a distinctive form of panentheism, that is, on a full-fledged ontology and Weltanschaung, a conception of the world.

This approach may beget most welcome additions to the field by nourishing the debate, through bringing into the scholarly and the public discussion fresh
novel conceptions of contemporary public governance and administration. It also has the virtue of bringing philosophical conceptions to the fore and indeed upfront, by taking ontological considerations as the starting point, rather than confining them to the background. By making the philosophical foundations of the proposed argument explicit, books in this approach can enable the most fruitful of dialogues to unfold amongst scholars and practitioners, irrespective of whether the ontological point of departure of the authors is similar or dissimilar (the latter is the case for the author of this book, whose ontology is different from that of Stout and Love), thus powerfully contributing to the development of the field of public governance and administration.

A third approach to bring philosophy into PA, which we call ‘Revisiting Selectively’, starts from the actuality and ‘burning issues’ in contemporary PA, and thence aims at bringing philosophy into public administration. It focuses key topics of contemporary significance for the field, and queries into them from a philosophical standpoint. The main difference with the first approach outlined above lies in the focus: the emphasis in this third approach does not lie in reviewing the scientific literature in the field of public governance and administration to ‘uncover’ the unexpressed philosophical underpinnings of the authors who contributed to the literature (like in the first approach), but rather in carrying out a critique of salient issues in the public debate – a trait which makes this approach in some regards akin to the so-called ‘critical theory’ approach. For example, Fox and Miller, notably in their joint work (Miller and Fox, 2007 – already reviewed in Chapter 6), provide a very sharp, abrasive at times, critique of representative democracy by challenging the ‘orthodoxy’ of the majoritarian mode of democracy, to then discuss three main alternatives: the neo-liberal response (which replaces people’s will with market mechanisms), the constitutional response (which substitutes the constitution and the effecting of constitutional principles for the electoral victors of the moment), and the communitarian response, or tendency (which ‘seeks to replace the loop with direct interface between administration and the citizenry’, Miller and Fox, 2007, p. 30). As shown by this example, this approach is less concerned with reviewing the social scientific literature as it stands in order to shed light on issues of contemporary significance and actuality – like, as in the example, to argue about fundamental flaws in representative democracy (and its implications for public accountability, a key theme in the field of PA). Indeed, this approach – which as practised at times shows quite abrasive traits – might be employed to demystify a number of oft-held assumptions, or at least to critically revisit a number of topics in the field: from the mechanisms at work in public accountability to the problematic links between ‘populism’, popular mandate, and the moral dilemmas of the accountable public administrator and public manager, and so forth. In sum, this represents a valuable
third strategy for advancing a research agenda aimed at bringing philosophical thought and critique into the field of PA.

A fourth approach, the one which we have labelled ‘Philosophising Systematically’ is the one closest to the overall thrust of the present book (see also Whetsell, 2018). The point of departure here is the body of philosophical thought as it has been codified in the academia and vetted by scholars over the decades and centuries. This body of knowledge, understanding and wisdom is then applied in as much a systematic way as possible to the field of PA. Different strands of philosophical inquiry are systematically referred to, in turn, to explore the potential of each of them to shed light on one or the other aspect or profile of the field of PA, conceived of in mostly academic terms, as the body of knowledge that is being produced, accumulated (to the extent it is cumulative in nature) and reproduced in Public Administration Departments in the academia. The main thrust of this collective effort is directed towards building up the edifice of ‘philosophy for public administration’, where the preposition ‘for’ indicates the fundamental thrust of this approach, which lies in employing philosophical speculation to enlighten facets of the study and the practice of public administration, and by means of it finding new viewpoints on administrative themes and issues. As recalled at the outset, the starting point is indeed the body of philosophical thought produced over the centuries through philosophical speculation; however, the basic requisite lies in knowledge of the field of PA and the charting of it: philosophical thought is then deployed for critically revisiting and rethinking contemporary PA themes and issues – as this book has attempted to do (see in particular Chapter 9). The main actors in this approach are scholars of PA, not scholars of philosophy: the former map the field of PA and identify the areas where philosophical thought may usefully be tapped; the latter provide the wells of knowledge as well as the methodological rigour in how philosophical debate at the highest academic standards is conducted, for application to the field of PA.

These approaches concern the problem of how to advance knowledge in PA by bringing philosophy back into it: they are about knowledge generation. We now turn to the problem of knowledge transmission: the teaching of philosophy in PA programmes.

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION PROGRAMMES

In the previous section we worked out a research agenda for integrating philosophical knowledge into PA. This section argues that philosophy as an academic field of knowledge should be incorporated also – and equally importantly – into the teaching of PA, and that this may occur at all levels of tertiary and lifelong education. The rationale for this is the argument, developed
throughout the book, that philosophical knowledge provides a distinctive and constitutive contribution for an improved understanding of PA, alongside and beyond the specific bodies of knowledge furnished by the disciplines that constitute the field of PA (like management, law, organisation science, political science, sociology, social psychology, or economics – see Chapter 1).

In order to systematically include the teaching of philosophy for PA in educational and training programmes, a range of practical questions about the place and contents of the subject ‘philosophy for PA’ require being addressed:

- **Questions about positioning**: what could and should be the place of philosophy in PA curricula? At what level should philosophy be taught, that is, should it be confined to the upper levels, like masters and PhD, or be present also at undergraduate level? And should it be confined to longer programmes (one year or more), or should it also be included in shorter programmes for public administrators, like executive education courses for top managers?

- **Questions about contents and tools**: what could and should be the key contents of philosophy for PA that are being taught? How to choose the core topics when constraints about the configuration of the educational programme require selection and prioritisation? What are available teaching tools (books, handbooks, other readings, and the like) which may support the teaching of philosophy for PA?

- **Questions of consistency**: what should and could be the relations of philosophy for PA with the other courses being taught in a PA programme?

- **Questions of methods**: what teaching methods should be employed to teach philosophy for PA?

We address these questions in turn. First, the positioning of themes of philosophy for PA in the curriculum/syllabus of a PA programme. There are three basic options here. The first one consists of introducing topics of philosophy for PA within already established modules in PA programmes; such courses could be – where present – modules of public ethics and public values, or modules of epistemology and research methods in the social sciences. The main risk with this approach is that the introduction of topics of philosophy for PA may easily come to be perceived as just a marginal addition, or be interpreted in a biased and narrow way, for example, if it is introduced in a module of research methods, students might get the perception that philosophy coincides with epistemology, which is instead but one branch of philosophy. The second option consists of introducing philosophy for PA as part and parcel of the introductory courses of the BSc/MSc in PA or MPA or PhD programme, that is, those courses typically devoted to introducing PA as a subject and a field of study to students whose background may be highly varied. The third
option could be to set up a distinct module of Philosophy for PA alongside other more conventional modules in the syllabus. All three options have pros and cons, though the second and third ones appear more promising in terms of bringing philosophy for PA more centre stage in the overall learning experience of the students.

A related question concerns the level – undergraduate, postgraduate, or research/PhD – at which it may be deemed more appropriate to introduce the study of philosophy for PA. There is no univocal answer to this question, as it may depend on a range of other contextual factors, not least the extent to which philosophy is being taught at secondary school in a given country. To mention two examples at the opposite poles, philosophy is extensively studied in Italy’s secondary school, in which at least 40 per cent of the student population attaining the highest level of secondary education – the ‘academic-orientated’ share of the student population amongst which most pupils continue to university degrees – are exposed to three years of study of philosophy, in most instances prepared by the five-year study of Latin, and for part of them also ancient Greek – both languages being extremely significant for the study of (Western) philosophy. At the opposite pole, philosophy is virtually not taught in Britain’s secondary school, hence any development of it at tertiary education level would require introducing the students to the basics of philosophy before delving deeper into the matter. In this regard, introducing the study of philosophy for PA at undergraduate level might be easier in those countries where philosophy is systematically being taught at secondary school, whilst it might be more uphill an undertaking where it is not.

We would further argue that elements of philosophy for PA may be of significance also beyond the more structured and longer university undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, and that it is highly significant also in executive education courses. This might appear like a puzzling statement, since executive education is considered to be the ‘practical’ form of education par excellence, thence the expectation that philosophical thought, with its speculative nature, is not amenable to being taught in these courses. Quite the contrary: as we have seen in Chapter 2, it was the philosopher Aristotle who first introduced the very notion of ‘practical reasoning’ (notably in his writings in the *Nicomachean Ethics*) and who outlined the meaning and the contours of practical reasoning. Aristotle also wrought out the difference between the contemplative reason and the calculative reason, the latter being the one which weighs the means in function of the ends to be attained. Thus, we argue that philosophy for PA is of significance also for executive education programmes, and philosophical notions may resonate very well with the lived experience of PA practitioners and spark thoughtful discussions and illuminate the dilemmas and the quandaries that the street-level bureaucrat and the public managers have to face in managing public organisation and public services (Parker, 2019).
Shifting to the second set of questions about the contents to be taught, the main question is what could and should be the key contents of philosophy for PA? And the complementary question is what extant tools are available that can provide the practical support for enabling the teaching of philosophy in PA programmes? The most immediate (and admittedly very parochial) answer to the latter question is – of course – that this very book aims to be a tool and to provide the repertoire of readings required for introducing philosophy for PA to a university-level audience, and to do so in one, compact textbook, that while referring to a wide range of scientific works in both the realm of philosophy and the domain of PA studies for the readers willing to further deepen the topic, also aims at synthesising the main elements and provide easy-to-access guidance to introducing philosophy for PA for both students and teachers. It goes without saying, the other many works encountered and discussed throughout this book could provide valuable entries, like the Lynch and Cruise (2006) edited volume we discussed in Chapter 1 and recalled throughout this book. A number of books examine specific profiles of philosophical thought applied to PA, like epistemology (for an exemplar, see Riccucci, 2010). Dedicated chapters apply philosophical analysis to public administration, notably the foundations of administrative action (Virtanen, 2018). Contributions appearing in two notable scientific journals: Administrative Theory and Praxis and Public Voices provide another entry point. Some sparse yet relevant papers in mainstream PA journals also contribute like the de Graaf and van Asperen, 2018, article which discusses the use of images and the art with philosophical contents, for the study of PA, and then examines in detail Lorenzetti’s masterpiece, The Good Government, which we have commented on in Chapter 7.

Having dealt with the question about tools, we can now turn to the main question of the substantive contents to be given prominence in bringing philosophical knowledge into PA programmes. Two main approaches may be outlined. The first lies in focusing on selected branches of philosophy, identified as the ‘most pertinent’ for the purposes of shedding light on aspects of PA, or at least as those thematically closest to the topics and issues traditionally debated in PA. Examples of such branches could be: epistemology, which then becomes epistemology of research methods for PA; or public ethics and notably the ethics of public officials; or political philosophy, with a focus on the role of public administration in political and policy processes and structures. The second approach centres on philosophy as such, and aims at discussing in their full breadth key philosophers and philosophies, to then apply these bodies of knowledge to PA. The second approach is basically what this book attempts to do throughout all chapters, and notably from Chapter 4 to Chapter 8, on the assumption that this more systematic approach is also the most potent one, since it can enable at its utmost the ‘mind-opening’ benefits that derive from philosophical thought applied to PA, and that may instil in
students the kind of critical reasoning that is becoming more and more important for the performance of the job of public administrator in times in which certainties are crumbling and issues that appeared settled re-emerge in all their thorny complexity. However, it is only fair to say that both approaches have their pros and cons: ultimately, what matters is the alignment of the contents of philosophy for PA with the other contents and modules of the PA programme, and on top of this the alignment and consistency with the learning objectives and the broader pedagogical concerns underpinning the PA programme.

This consideration brings us to consider the question of consistency, the consistency of the topics of philosophy for PA that are chosen for being taught with the other themes and more broadly learning objectives of the programme. This is in a sense the most challenging question, but also one which we can only limitedly discuss in the framework of this book as the answer, obviously, depends on the specific features of the teaching programme under consideration, and the related learning objectives it pursues. What could be said from the standpoint of this book is that philosophical thought may also act as an integrative force, a way of linking together the diverse thematic areas of PA, by showing the deeper interconnections across disciplines and topics; for example, the issue of human liberty and individual agency is a cross-cutting issue to many social sciences, thereby encompassing those social sciences constituting PA as the interdisciplinary study of government – see Chapter 1 – as well as for vetting real-life issues of decision-making by public administrators and managers: thence, any improved understanding of this central topic can contribute to a better and more integrated understanding of a range of related issues, scattered throughout the courses of the PA programme.

The final set of questions are those about teaching methods and approaches. What combination of learning methods is most appropriate for the teaching of philosophy for PA? And, relatedly, what would be the most appropriate teaching team for such contents? One teacher versed in both, or two teachers, one more versed in PA and the other in philosophy? Starting from methods, one initial distinction, however crude, may be drawn between an approach emphasising class discussions and ‘case studies’ and other interactive methods to introduce philosophical problematics, on one hand, and an approach placing frontal teaching at the centre, and then complementing it with more interactive methods, on the other hand. Some of the pros of interactive methods lie in that they may stimulate reflection upon the topic and a sense of ownership by learners, while amongst the cons it may be counted that the starting point of students in terms of knowledge of philosophy may be low in many countries (e.g. because students are not trained in philosophy), and hence introductory elements presented through frontal teaching may be indispensable. Indeed, an upside of frontal teaching lies in its capacity to provide students with an introduction and overview of the main topics, a learning requirement likely to be in
large demand amongst PA students exposed to these contents. Thus, it seems to us a conclusion that may be drawn on this point is that a combination of frontal teaching and more interactive learning methods may be optimal, with different degrees and combinations of the two methods as a function of the overall learning objectives of the programme, and also of the didactical expertise and skills available – Solomonic as this conclusion may look like. (And it goes without saying our considerations apply equally when the programme is delivered through distance learning methods, in which ‘frontal teaching’ and ‘interactive learning methods’ are incorporated into the employed distance learning means.)

To conclude, this section addresses a range of issues involved if the teaching of philosophy for PA is included in PA programmes, at all levels of higher education, from undergraduate to research degrees, as well as in lifelong learning. We argue that the integration of philosophical knowledge may enable students of PA programmes to acquire a more critical stance towards the various disciplines that contribute to PA as the interdisciplinary study of government (Raadschelders, 2005), by means of shedding light on the ‘philosophical residue’ contained in each of them – from law to economics, from political science to management (Chapter 1). The inclusion of philosophy in PA education and training may better equip present and prospective public administrators to decipher the complexity of the current world and interconnect better and deeper the varied contributions – valuable but by their very nature fragmentary – provided by the different disciplines that underpin PA (law, economics, political science, management, sociology, social psychology, etc.), for the ultimate purpose of the betterment of public governance, public policies and the public services. Philosophy may also provide a distinctive contribution in shedding light on otherwise under-explored profiles of PA, notably when it comes to addressing issues of value-based judgements enabling the making of decisions in executive roles: an issue of relevance for executives in all sorts of organisations – public or private (Hodgkinson, 1978) – and yet possibly of special significance for public administrators.

THE CHALLENGES BROUGHT ABOUT BY TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Philosophical thought may also shed light on the huge impact of new technologies on PA, like any other aspect of human life: one may think here of Heidegger’s reflections on how technology affects the relationship between humankind and the revealing (the hiding, for Heidegger) of Being. We briefly hint here at two developments: genetics and the Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) and the related development of new media and the social media.
Developments in genetics seem to open up the possibility for individualised treatments, up to the point that some PA scholars have evoked the perspective of transhumanism, referring to ‘the question of whether new biotechnologies enable humans to overcome the determinism of their biological inheritance and actively participate in its expression’ (Catlaw and Treisman, 2014, p. 441). Brought to the extreme, post-humanism claims the possibility of the death of death. Whether this is feasible in any meaningful sense is an issue for medicine and medical knowledge (conversations I had with medics noticed how individualised treatments for postponing the death of an individual would require systematic and continued interventions on the person’s body, a treatment which would more resemble the cruelest of tortures than the enjoyment of some form of immortality). But it is not only an issue for the field of medicine. Is the death of death compatible with the second principle of thermodynamics (‘the most metaphysical of physical laws’, see Bergson, 2005) whereby every closed system increases the level of dis-order over time (although life may also be seen as an attempt to locally counter this universal tendency, see Bergson, 1907)? At a more strictly metaphysical level it may be questioned whether the perspective of the death of death is compatible with any philosophy of becoming? And from an existentialist perspective, it may be asked: wouldn’t this attempt to overcome death by technological means make death even more constitutive of existence (in an approach à la Heidegger, see also Waterlot, 2019)? The existentialist interpretation of anguish as the experience of nothingness would also lead to interpretation of such experiences as revealing the irreducible, constitutive openness of existence to being through death.

Philosophical arguments may be brought to show the impossibility – and the absurdity – of the claim of the death of death. However, leaps in postponing death cannot be ruled out, opening up scenarios that bring us well beyond the kind of ‘ageing population’ phenomenon we are experiencing (itself so much underestimated by policymakers and public managers, see Pollitt, 2016b). How can the field of PA re-imagine itself and its future developments, the study and practice of PA, against the backdrop of such scenarios? Scientific and philosophical imagination should be brought to the fore to cope with such challenges.

To hint at another example, we may heed the changes brought about by the impressive – and often appropriately qualified as disruptive – changes driven by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), which go under the label of ‘digital government’, which has grown into a full-fledged field of inquiry in PA (think of the applications of Artificial Intelligence – AI – and algorithmic governance), and the tumultuous development of the new media and the social media, especially now that social media and new media are being mainstreamed in PA studies (Criado et al., 2013; Mergel, 2013). What modifications may social media induce in life, in its social dimension and
its biological dimensions (the prosthetic function of new media, see Kember and Zylinska, 2012)? Has the Internet brought about a revolution in communication as did the shift from the oral to the written form of communication, or the invention of the press? If so, what new possibilities are opened for the investigation of reality by the human mind? What are the implications of the hyper-reality in which we live in terms of the way it reshapes the public space? What is the significance of philosophical knowledge and the *forma mentis* that the study of philosophy brings with it for ‘navigating’ the ocean of information made available by the Internet? And specifically, what are its implications for the study and practice of PA? What public functions will be utterly transformed by the dis-intermediating potential of Internet-based technologies and reshaped by algorithmic governance and artificial intelligence, and how can the tapping of collective intelligence be enabled by Internet-based technologies? And what do these transformations mean for the practice of PA?

These questions lead us to the issue of how a broad philosophical perspective can better equip and enable us to understand e-governance and e-government ‘in perspective’ and ‘in context’.

These are questions and issues – tackled by innumerable contemporary studies in the humanities and the social sciences (from the field of communications studies to the field of social medicine) – that only rarely and indirectly surface in the ‘core’ PA scholarly literature, but yet they are likely to matter a lot for years to come.

A broad philosophical perspective might be part and parcel of the conceptual repertoire required of the PA scholar and practitioner alike to tackle the daunting task of coping with such huge challenges and issues.

**CODA AND OUTLOOK**

This book makes the argument for the significance of the systematic application of philosophical thinking to the field of PA, and it advocates the contribution philosophy may bring to PA in terms of inspiration and enlightenment. In doing so, it also suggests the possibility to engage in ‘big narratives’ about public governance and administration – that is, about our possibility of both understanding and knowing continuity and change in the fundamental characters of public governance and administration. Indeed, this book urges the PA scholarly and practitioners community to engage in ‘big narratives’ about public governance and administration – that is, in big narratives enabled by the possibility that we have to attain knowledge and understanding about the fundamental characters of public governance and public administration. We thus argue that those engaged in the study and the practice of PA should not content themselves with ‘zooming in’ on specific problems and issues to be
investigated with relatively well-specified methods; instead, the big picture should be aimed at – by scholars and practitioners alike.

This book also advocates the search for consistency across the various findings of the research work. Scientists like the biologist Edward Wilson have urged scholars to strive for unity of the knowledge generated in different disciplines and fields (Wilson, 1998), a struggle for consistency of the various findings, insights, forms of knowledge and understandings of reality; and this call has not been without echoes in PA (see Talbot, 2010). This is a thrust which, we notice, is at the heart of most of the philosophical endeavours we have encountered throughout this book, at least since Plato and Aristotle. This book stems also from the effort to achieve – however tentatively and in a patchy way – some form of enhanced consistency within the field of PA and between PA and the field of philosophy. It stretches well-beyond the comfort zone of contemporary PA scholars (surely of this PA scholar) in order to try to reach out and indicate a direction of travel which – it is deemed – is of utmost importance for the field of PA.

To briefly review in conclusion the journey undertaken, throughout the book, and notably in Chapters 4 to 8, we have delved into key themes stemming from the application of philosophical thought to PA. Notably, in Chapter 4 we reviewed some possible applications and implications for the field of PA of such philosophical streams as: structuralism and themes in social ontology; Neo-Marxism and the thought of Antonio Gramsci; existentialism and the profiling of the existentialist public administrator and citizen; historicism. Other philosophical perspectives fraught with implications for PA that are discussed in Chapter 4 include metaphysical contingency and ontologies of possibility (as opposed to ontologies of necessity), for their significance on the ways in which notions like ‘potential’, ‘possibility’ and ‘chance’ are treated in the social sciences at large and in PA specifically; and the possible implications of philosophical speculation about the very notion of time for the ways in which PA is studied. Last, but by no means least, we delved into the enduring significance of the Kantian foundation of the transcendental rational subject, and on issues about human nature, which are foundational to PA.

In Chapter 5 we turned to the issue of justification of a(ny) governance system, debating the two overarching perspectives of the ‘common good’ and the ‘social contract’ for the grounding of public governance, and the promises and limits of the Rawlsian and the personalist approaches as ways to supplement and complement the two dominant perspectives. We then applied these perspectives to the issue of the legitimacy underpinnings of public sector reform doctrines.

In Chapter 6 we examined philosophical-epistemological issues, thereby also revisiting interpretivist, (neo- and post-)positivist, and realist approaches to the study of PA. The contemporary meaning for PA studies of the dispute
Researching and teaching philosophy for public administration

over the nature of universal concepts has also been reviewed, noticing how in multiple respects where a PA scholar stands in terms of her/his conception of the nature of the field of PA depends on her/his philosophical stance over the nature of universal concepts: a dispute that lingers from the medieval time into our contemporary epoch and continues to be relevant and of extreme actuality.

In Chapter 7 the enduring significance of the virtue discourse in public governance has been re-proposed by means of the power of the art (Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s masterpiece *The Good Government*) and its capacity to create a ‘world other’, yet inspirational for us. The notion of alternative worlds has also brought us back to the original conception of utopia and utopian thinking as worked out by Thomas More. We then reviewed the conceptual weaponry that public administrationists are endowed with by expanding the repertoire of tools to encompass paradigms and ideal-types. We were then brought back with our feet well planted on earth by Machiavelli’s lucid scrutiny of human nature, which also puts to the centre of the stage the theme of the immutability of human nature. We have also been reminded by Machiavelli that renouncing the ‘assumption’ of the immutability of human nature has ground-shaking implications – and that Machiavelli in his studies found confirmations of this assumption. His work stands as a continued challenge for those who assume the opposite hypothesis (mutability of human nature) to put forward a demonstration of it, and deal with its implications.

In Chapter 8 we revisited in a comprehensive way the notions of: ‘practice’; ‘model’; ‘paradigm’; ‘ideal-type’; and ‘utopia’ and discussed how these represent powerful conceptual tools for the study and practice of PA, notably when seen in an integrated way.

Finally, in the previous chapter, intellectual traditions of PA have been revisited in light of their broader philosophical underpinnings by showing how each tradition relies on, and taps from, a range of philosophical perspectives. We have thus set the relativist/post-modernist tradition against the faltering of both the Hegelian system and the Kantian foundation of the human being as *the* rational subject, and discussed the limits of going too far in the opposite direction and too easily dismissing the inheritance of Western philosophy. We then discussed the tradition of ‘PA as scientific knowledge’ against the backdrop of the philosophical streams of positivism and neo-positivism, as well as conventionalism and Popperian notions of scientific knowledge. In the perspective of PA as practical wisdom, we noticed how philosophical thought is quintessential to it and has accompanied this tradition over the millennia. In the tradition of PA as practical experience, we have noticed how practical reasoning is porous to a multitude of ontological, ethical and epistemological issues, which a philosophical perspective may aid to unveil.

In applying philosophical thinking to PA, we have adopted a broad conception of PA as being, in a combined and integrated way: a science (an interdis-
ciplinary field, in which a variety of social sciences are applied in a combined way); an art (as administering is inherently a human activity with an artistic, ‘craftsmanship-like’ component); a profession (indeed a range of professions interconnected by the obligations and rights that come with the exercise of public functions and the delivery of public services); and a form of humanism (administering as a value-laden human activity, a conception very much in the line of Waldo’s conception of PA).

Ultimately, to the extent PA is science, we conceive of science as episteme – rigour – and as wissenschaft – a field of intellectual inquiry which draws from the social sciences (and also from other bodies of knowledge) and that shares with them the common problems and quandaries of scientific knowledge. Yet the nature of PA as also and in an integrated way an art, a profession and a form of humanism is part and parcel of its nature, and hence PA is a field of intellectual inquiry which taps also from the humanities, as well as from the (often tacit and uncodified) forms of knowledge that are embodied in an art and a profession.

In conclusion, this book has engaged with the daunting task of providing an introduction to the complex and multifaceted interconnections between fundamental philosophical issues and the field of PA, and it has pointed to some facets of its enduring quest for philosophical foundations. It is our hope to have been able to profile some lines of application of philosophical streams of inquiry to themes of relevance for contemporary PA. The significance of spanning across philosophers and philosophies over the ages and going back in time – rather than confining to the most recent strands – for a deeper understanding of philosophical issues in PA has been highlighted during this journey through philosophical thought. Paths for finer grained examinations and critical discussions of contemporary public governance and administration and its foundations in philosophical argumentation have been pointed out. We hope these paths – pathways – will be taken up by the PA scholarly and practitioners’ community, and that philosophy – the body of philosophical knowledge and understanding engendered by philosophical speculation over the millennia – will be recognised more and more as a reference of central significance for the development of the field of PA.

NOTES


2. The approach of case studies is in philosophy technically called casuistry when applied to moral philosophy: casuistry is a method elaborated by the Jesuit Fathers and to which modern-day case study techniques owe more than is usually recognised.
3. Wilson has introduced the term ‘consilience’ to indicate the linking of knowledge generated across disciplines to achieve common ground for explanations. Wilson adopted the term ‘because its rarity has preserved its precision’ (1998, p. 6). Wilson upholds a strong vision of the possible unity of knowledge, mostly patterned on the ways in which the natural sciences may (allegedly) achieve it. We uphold a vision which is at the same time even more ambitious and much less so. It is even more ambitious in the sense that it relies on philosophy as unifying perspective; it is less ambitious in the sense that we aim for exchange of knowledge and bridging of understanding rather than unity. It is also for these reasons that we prefer to stick to the term ‘consistency’.

4. The warning formulated by Thompson is that ontological shifts in emphasis can be an effective method of theory generation, but also a source of confusion when they turn into ontological drifts out of alignment (Thompson, 2011).