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Steven Parker: steven.parker@dmu.ac.uk

Abstract

This article reflects on how the philosophical foundations of public administration and the practice of local government can be linked together. Informed by Ongaro (2017) the relationship between philosophy and public administration is considered, followed by a discussion of what this means for local government. Virtue ethics and utilitarianism are applied to two current examples of local government practice. The article ends by detailing key points for the future relationship between philosophy and local government.

Keywords: Philosophy, local government, public administration

What is the meaning of philosophy for local government officers?

Steven Parker

This article considers the relationship between philosophical thought for public administration and local government, and how philosophical ‘wisdom’ may help officers in local government to make difficult decisions. The starting point is Ongaro’s recent book, *Philosophy and Public Administration: an Introduction* (2017, Elgar), a reading which has provided me with a great opportunity to reflect on the significance of philosophy for the field of public administration, and notably for the governance and management of local government as a specific example – with which I am more familiar - of a public administration setting.

The book familiarises the reader with numerous philosophers and philosophical positions but reviewing it is not the focus in this article. Ongaro claims (p6) that the book is designed for all interested or involved in public administration: ‘the scholar, student and practitioner’ alike, and this article therefore takes up his assertion that philosophy is useful for practitioners and asks, ‘what is the meaning of philosophy for local government officers?’

In this article I draw on my past experience as a local government officer (social worker, policy officer and manager) and as I am not a philosopher by training I found it useful – and hope the reader will find it useful too! - to test the book on myself. Also, the consideration that local government officers might benefit from learning about philosophy is a useful starting point (bearing in mind that some officers will have studied it previously). But the challenge of applying or relating philosophy to practice is not as easy as it sounds, and considering this provides an opportunity to reflect on organisational training (should philosophy be included in the training of public administrators, as argued in Ongaro, 2018?), individual modes of learning, as well as the explicit and tacit uses of philosophy, in so much that everyone is a ‘philosopher’ even if not trained in philosophy.

The article is structured as follows: it starts by introducing Ongaro’s book and moves on to considering philosophy in the practice of local government officers. It then briefly considers two philosophical positions considered in the book and their relationship with local government practice: the place of virtues and values in individual and collective decision-making, and the specific philosophical stream of utilitarianism. Lastly, the article offers some concluding thoughts on the relationship between philosophy and local government practice.

Philosophy and Public Administration

Ongaro provides a comprehensive introduction to the philosophical foundations of public administration. He states there is a gap in the literature on public administration and philosophy, and this provides the rationale for the book. In particular it is argued there is ‘scant attention to questions about ontology and political philosophy in the public administration literature’.

Philosophy is described as being concerned with key questions and themes: ‘what there is’ (metaphysics and ontology); ‘who we are/who I am’ (soul and mind); ‘how to live’ (ethics and morals); ‘how to live together’ (political philosophy) and ‘how to know/what we know’ (philosophy of knowledge/epistemology) (Kenny discussed in Ongaro, 2017: 6-7). The book covers a broad range of philosophical streams and ranges from classical and medieval to modern and contemporary philosophy, and it discusses philosophical streams like phenomenology or empiricism. Wide ranging

schools of philosophers and philosophies are introduced, including Aristotle, Kant and Hegel, as well as less well known areas like Patristic and medieval philosophy. The parts of the book on applying philosophical thought to public administration, political philosophy and public governance seem all especially relevant to local government.

Ongaro states that philosophical knowledge and understanding provides a ‘distinctive and constructive contribution to the knowledge and understanding of public administration, alongside and beyond the knowledge provided by disciplines that contribute to the field of public administration’ (p5). The book also says there are various definitions of public administration and citing Bauer sees public administration as ‘a multidisciplinary endeavour with a prime focus on studying government in order to produce insights to improve government practice’(p10). For the purposes of this article I stretch this to mean local authority services, in addition to local government when elected local councillors come to mind. Lastly the relationship between public administration, public management and public governance are described as a ‘mapping of the same terrain’ (p11). Although respectful of these debates, this article does not engage with those more defining issues.

Philosophy and local government

I now consider the meaning of philosophy and local government, drawing on my experience of working in local government. Ongaro’s states that his book is useful for scholars, students *and practitioners*, and this provides a springboard to reflect more widely on the meaning of philosophy for local government officers.

There has been previous consideration on philosophy and local government but it remains an under researched area. Masugi (2010) discusses political philosophy and local government, highlighting the role of the local state and the citizens’ rights as citizens. These are important discussions for service delivery, and practical decisions such as whether a service should be outsourced, as well as for issues of coproduction and citizen participation. Although Ongaro’s book has a whole chapter on political philosophy, there is less emphasis on government size or type (central, local, regional); however, some of the discussions within it about the meaning of and the seeking of the common good (public value, multi-agency collaboration) can be argued to lie at the heart of local government practice.

There are some areas where philosophy can be more easily applied to local government. To start, the expectation that local government should in some way contribute to the common good, by promoting local wellbeing (e.g the power given to local authorities under the UK Local Government Act 2000 to promote economic, social and economic wellbeing, albeit that this has been replaced by a general power of competence in 2012 by the Localism Act 2011, itself aimed to enable the devolution of power to the community) illustrates a clear link between philosophy and the practice of local government. Attention to local wellbeing links to wider debates about ‘caring for place’ (Healey, 2018) with attention to a political focus about how the quality of place can play a significant role in enriching democratic practices, local governance and community. This strategic view of wellbeing and place is reflected in local city plans and strategies.

There are connections with deontological and consequentialist philosophy, as improving wellbeing speaks to the motivation to improve outcomes for individual users of local government services, particularly users who are vulnerable or at the highest levels of need. The role of virtues and values in driving an individual officer’s behaviour clearly links to discussions about wellbeing and outcomes, but also about the ‘how question’: how a local government officer delivers a service in ways that respect a service user’s dignity, privacy and confidentiality, keeping a balance with the desire to change or improve an outcome, or maintaining it to prevent delay (Dickinson, 2008: 7-9).

However, there are applied examples of how philosophy relates to applied local government practice, and Pollitt’s discussion of how the philosophy of the ‘universal concepts’ may apply to a practical issue like the analysis of a Total Quality Management (TQM) system in a public agency provides a useful starting point for discussing the nexus of theory and practice (Ongaro, p3). The philosophy of the universals originates in ancient and medieval philosophy and enquires whether concepts are real and exist as objects, or are the product of abstraction by reason, or are even non-existent and a mere ‘utterance of the voice’ (and in this latter conception the same words may mean totally different things to different people). TQM is an approach to management improvement where employees have a shared understanding of customer needs, organisational processes and communication. The philosophy of

the universals would ask whether TQM exists in itself, or it only exists in people's minds, since clearly defining a concept such as TQM in practice is problematic as it may be understood and applied differently by employees.

A similar line of reasoning can be applied to local government performance management regimes. I recall a range of UK New Labour government performance management frameworks in the 2000s, for example, the Comprehensive Performance Assessment, the Local Area Agreements, and before this, the Social Services Performance Assessment Framework. And I ask myself: did we – public officers – mean the same thing or different things with these notions? The philosophical reflection on the universals helps critical reflection about how local authorities, and the individuals working in them, understand and implement central government frameworks at the local level. As there was sometimes variation - when not outright confusion - in using them by different authorities, this illustrates the interplay between the frameworks as independent entities and their existence in people's minds.

The example of performance management shows how a relatively unknown philosophical problem can be related to and shed light on very practical issues in local government. However, it is political philosophy that has arguably had the greatest impact on local government studies. Indeed, Ongaro makes a clear distinction between ontology, epistemology, and political philosophy, and it is understandable why local government is thought of as an institution predominantly informed by, or at least understandable through, the lens of political philosophy (although all the branches of philosophy can be applied to shed light on aspects of it).

Political Philosophy and Local Government: Two examples

This article briefly now draws out two further examples of philosophical analysis introduced in Ongaro's book that can be applied to contemporary local government. First, is virtue ethics and values, deontology and eudaimonia. Aristotle initiated a concept of virtue and being virtuous that has proved resilient from ancient times through the development of the UK 19th Century Civil Service, to the present day. This is expressed in deontology (one's duty and motives) and how this is manifested in professional practice shaped by values and a sense of direction. This is also associated with Aristotle's notion of eudaimonia: a Greek concept denoting human

flourishing and the living of a full life, seen in choosing a profession, for example social work, where one might feel satisfied by putting into effect one's values through virtuous behaviour in a consequential way to improve the common good in society.

Although wide ranging - and specialist areas in themselves - these can be associated with a local government officer's motivation and choice to work for the public sector rather than the private sector. However, recent commentaries about public service argue that there has been an uncoupling between officers' virtues and values, a public service ethic. and the public interest. Elcock (2013) argued that we have forgotten 'what the Greeks taught us' and local government reforms under the banner of 'modernisation' and New Public Management inspired intervention have eroded the public service ethos and the very notions of citizenship and the public interest. Nevertheless, debates about public and professional values, and how contemporary local government staff perceive them, remain topical and relevant.

A second example that stands out for me in the book *Philosophy and Public Administration: an Introduction* is the philosophical analysis of utilitarianism, associated with Jeremy Bentham, James Mill and John Stuart Mill. Ongaro notes how utilitarianism sits in the common good approaches to the foundations of the legitimacy of a political system, and what is distinctive of it is the attempt to try to calculate some sort of well-being of the citizens (and service-users) of a political community by means of a notion of 'utility'. As a consequence "some sort of aggregate utility can also be derived, and this utility can be used as a measure of the common good" (p159). This approach is relevant to the tradition of strategic policy and planning in local government, with the requirement to do more for less, prioritising, setting eligibility criteria and at the same time improving outcomes and wellbeing. Since 2010 this is also associated with the austerity agenda in the UK and the requirement of local councils to make financial savings. Of course, there are many criticisms of utilitarianism that are not developed in this short article, including that it fails to respect individual rights or whether morality can be measured.

In practice, local authority commissioning - the process of planning services for citizens based on local needs - can be linked to utilitarianism, for example by using a performance based strategic approach to set priorities to improve the quality of life of vulnerable people. However, a utilitarian might argue with this focus on the

vulnerable, as in the search for aggregate utility and the “greatest good for the greatest number”, if a wider population of children access universal and preventative services earlier on (e.g Sure Start and early help services), this may lead to less demand for crisis services later in life. This, of course, would have to be measured alongside the aggregate utility of those at the highest level of need, including children in care.

However, at the present time the Children’s Commissioner for England has raised concerns that cuts to early years services are leading to more children entering care in England, with half of all spending on children’s services being used for 70,000 children in care¹ Recent news reports about the financial difficulties that councils are facing (e.g. Northamptonshire and East Sussex) means that even commissioning and delivering services for the most vulnerable children are at risk. As local authorities only have to focus on statutory services, because of financial constraints the demands on these statutory services will increase because non-statutory measures are not in place.

Concluding thoughts

On a personal level, in this short article I have welcomed the opportunity to reflect on how a systematic analysis of the philosophical foundations of public administration and the practice of local government can be linked together. This is not as easy as it sounds, and in addition to engaging with theories and identifying examples, it remains challenging to apply theories in practice. There are three points I want to make:

First, my take is that most practitioners in local government will not be aware of the range of philosophical positions in Ongaro’s book. If philosophy is used in local government, different philosophical perspectives may be applied to the same problem unconsciously, and there may be tensions that arise because of different value systems. Understanding philosophy might help to bring some clarity in these situations. As practitioners will not be acquainted with the various schools of thought

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jun/12/early-years-cuts-pushing-more-children-into-care-in-england>

in philosophy, this means that both scholars engaging with philosophical notions and practitioners will need to consider how their work relates to the public governance and the practice of local government. This has impacts for training, perhaps by contributing to some of the technical training available, for example performance management, human resources management and strategic planning. All of these could be enhanced by some discussion on selected philosophies and philosophers, applied to case examples. There is an ongoing debate on the place of philosophy in the training of civil servants (Ongaro, 2018).

Second, it might be thought that having awareness of philosophical issues can help resolve a decision dilemma, or offer a justification for a decision. Conversely, philosophy could lead to a drag on decision making or provide added complexity when not needed. This is about using philosophy appropriately, explicitly and tacitly, depending on setting. Whereas a strategic commissioner may have time to think about a theory (e.g. utilitarianism and priority setting), a social worker's use of ethical guidance and virtuous behaviour in a crisis situation might be more tacit.

Third, I have a final concern that it might be thought that only those at the top - 'public administrators' or local government 'officers' - can benefit from having an acquaintance – and indeed training (Ongaro, 2018) - in philosophy. This might lead to implying that philosophical wisdom can only provide guidance for those 'up in the hierarchy' who are formally entitled to make decisions ('managers'): far from it, philosophical thinking is equally crucial for the training of street-level bureaucrats, and indeed it is some of the lower paid front line staff who deal with some of the most vulnerable citizens and have some of the most complex decisions to make. These staff can also hugely benefit from the kind of critical thinking inspired by bringing philosophy into the training and education of all those who contribute to the public services.

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Steven Parker is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Politics, People and Place at De Montfort University, Leicester.