



Non-Western Philosophies and Public Administration

Journal:	<i>Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration</i>
Manuscript ID	Draft
Manuscript Type:	Discussions of New Developments and Trends
Keywords:	Non-Western Philosophies, Public Administration, Theory of Public Administration, Public Governance, Philosophy and Public Administration
Abstract:	(N/A as this is commissioned essay)

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In this essay I make the intellectual case for the value of research about non-Western philosophy applied to public administration. The starting point for my argument is that philosophy—here referring to a body of thought, which is also institutionalised as a field of inquiry in academia about the ‘nature of things’ and the ultimate foundations of reality, human life, and human beings living together—is a key reference discipline for public administration. Notably, public administration is the interdisciplinary study of government: a set of disciplinary approaches drawn from the social sciences (e.g., political science, management, law) aimed at enhancing our knowledge and understanding of government in action. Each constituent discipline of public administration contains an ineliminable ‘philosophical residue’: by this I mean that for each social science contributing to the study of public administration, not all its research goals and methods can be unproblematically stated nor its concepts uncontroversially standardised in such ways to make the given science totally independent of philosophical considerations. So, for example we need to bring political philosophy into the picture to complement political science, philosophy of law to complement law, and so forth. The presence of a philosophical residue in each constituent discipline explains why public administration requires the examination of its philosophical underpinnings and highlights the integrative function of philosophy.

At another level, it may also be argued that public administration should be seen not only as an interdisciplinary field, but also as an art, a profession and a value-laden human activity, administration being concerned intrinsically with the making of value-laden decisions, which demand decision-makers to exercise judgement and wisdom. In this sense, public administration can be seen as part of the humanities too, alongside the social sciences. It draws upon philosophical thought about issues such as human nature, the ontology of social action, and legitimacy criteria that provide justification for a political community in its public governance and administrative dimensions – all issues that can only be examined in relation to public administration by bringing philosophical thought into the picture.

In modern times, there have been some attempts to apply philosophy to public administration, emphasizing either individual philosophers or specific branches of philosophy, but these did not address the contribution of philosophy systematically. To fill a significant intellectual

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3 void I perceived, I recently introduced a systematic application of Western philosophical
4 thought to public administration (Ongaro, 2020).
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8 What my and other efforts to apply philosophy to public administration have in common is
9 that they rely on *Western* philosophy, and do not consider other philosophical traditions.
10 Indeed, I mention this limitation in the introductory chapter of my book, “A [...] limitation lies
11 in this book being mostly centered on Western philosophy [...] the focus of this book is [...]
12 on Western thought.” I then refer by way of example to Islamic and Eastern philosophy and
13 write: “I do hope this effort may be matched by analogous efforts from colleagues
14 knowledgeable of – to continue with the previously mentioned examples – Islamic
15 philosophy and Eastern philosophy, in order to jointly contribute towards a wider and wider
16 approach to the application of philosophical thought to the field of public administration and
17 public governance.” (Ongaro, 2020, p. 25).
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27 I would therefore like to elaborate here on the limits of relying exclusively on Western
28 philosophy, and on why the field of public administration would benefit from the application
29 of non-Western philosophies (building on considerations suggested by Wolfgang Drechsler,
30 2020).
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36 The notion of ‘non-Western philosophy’ is broad, as indeed it is broad the notion of
37 ‘Western’ philosophy. Defining what philosophy is, and what it is not, is an arduous question
38 that has puzzled the minds of thinkers over the millennia. A useful starting point is
39 considering that philosophy does not have a subject matter but that it does have key questions
40 and themes such as: ‘Who are we/who am I’ (the question of the nature of soul and mind);
41 ‘How to live’ (the question of ethics and morality); ‘How to live together’ (the political
42 philosophical question); and ‘How to know/what we know’ (the epistemological question).
43 For the purposes of this essay, I then consider to be ‘philosophical’ all bodies of thought that
44 engage with these and the manifold related questions, thereby encompassing in a broad way
45 traditions of thought in philosophy and religion. While in some abstract terms - and in a
46 Western perspective - philosophy and religion are distinct, at times it may not be easy, nor
47 appropriate, to distinguish between religion and philosophy: for example, it is debated
48 whether Confucianism is a philosophy or a religion, but surely for the purposes of this essay
49 Confucianism should be included in the ‘non-Western philosophies’ being discussed here,
50 and its application to public administration is of central significance.
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5 The application of non-Western philosophies to public administration can be valuable for two
6 distinct, extremely important reasons. One pertains to the contextual-cultural lens and the
7 other is the universal understanding of public administration that may come from the
8 application of non-Western philosophies to the field. Let me discuss these in turn,
9 immediately alerting the reader that the latter lies at the core of my argument about why non-
10 Western philosophies may contribute to public administration not just 'locally', that is,
11 applied to the public administrative systems of non-Western contexts, but globally.
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19 The first line of argumentation – what I call the cultural-contextual lens – takes as its starting
20 point that conceptions of the world are ideational bases of action and hence are socially
21 relevant. Conceiving the world in one way and not another does matter, notably when a
22 worldview is widely held across a population and its elite groups. For example, this has
23 historically been the case for Confucianism in China, and other countries like Korea, pre-
24 Meiji Japan, Vietnam or Singapore. Put directly, philosophical conceptions are part and
25 parcel of culture, culture is part and parcel of 'context', and context is influential in public
26 administration. Here resides a problem: most international studies on contextual influences on
27 public administration are Western, their analytical apparatuses are Western, and hence they
28 are shaped by Western philosophical frames. Even factoring in the influence that Western
29 culture has had on nearly every corner of the globe, beginning with colonialism and later
30 'globalization', Western conceptions have added new layers of ideational sources to pre-
31 existing sources, but the added layers are a part of the picture only, and do not form its
32 totality. Following this line of reasoning, analyses of contextual influences on public
33 administration that encompass the ideational bases rooted in local-indigenous philosophical
34 thought would supplement and complement Western analytical apparatuses applied to explain
35 contextual influences on public administration in non-Western contexts; they would also
36 enrich and ultimately improve the very analytical frameworks used to explain contextual
37 influences.
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53 The second line of argumentation involves the universalistic contribution to the
54 understanding of public administration that may come from the application of non-Western
55 philosophies. It considers non-Western philosophies as worldviews not just idiosyncratic to
56 the context where they originated, but as universal worldviews that for historical reasons have
57 mostly been applied to the political-administrative systems of the countries in which they
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3 originated, but that would be potentially applicable globally. In straightforward terms,
4 Confucian thought is no less global in applicability than Plato's or Aristotle's or Kant's
5 thought: Confucian thought can be applied for reflecting on the foundations of public
6 governance and administration in the West, and not be 'confined' to application in China, or
7 elsewhere in the East.
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13 To flesh out the argument, we can consider briefly an example about the kind of
14 universalistic contribution to understanding public administration that can come from
15 Western philosophy, before turning to the core message of this article, namely a call to
16 scholars knowledgeable of non-Western philosophies to engage in a similar effort to bring the
17 immense richness of these philosophies to the fore in public administration discourse.
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24 To briefly introduce a Western example of how philosophy, notably political philosophy, can
25 be deployed to shed light on otherwise underexplored issues in public administration, we can
26 consider the issue of the legitimacy criteria for a political system. This is the key philosophical
27 question of 'justification', that is, what grounds the legitimacy of a political system. Legitimacy is
28 concerned with gaining the consent of the members of a polity on its very foundations, it regards
29 being able to command loyalty to the political system from its participants. It is a traditional issue in
30 philosophy and poses formidable questions also for public administration. It is ubiquitous in
31 contemporary debates in public governance and management about how the public sector and public
32 services *ought to be* organised. Justification is concerned with 'giving reasons to value something',
33 notably to value a political system, and the way in which public administration is organised into it.
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43 In the West, there have been at least three basic philosophical positions to tackle the issue of
44 justification: common good arguments originating in the thinking of the ancient Greek
45 philosopher Plato; social contract arguments originating in the thinking of the Swiss
46 philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau; and social justice arguments, which have been tirelessly
47 wrought out by the American philosopher John Rawls. Common good arguments start from
48 the consideration that knowledge of human nature and therefore of what is 'the wellbeing' of
49 an individual is the indispensable starting point for designing a political system: a system is
50 legitimate if and only if public governance is such that the wellbeing of each and every
51 member of the political community is improved, and philosophers play a key role because
52 they are knowledgeable of human nature. Utilitarianism is a variant of common good
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3 arguments insofar as individual utility is a measure of wellbeing. Social contract arguments
4 encompass the camp of those who tend to reject the assumption that ‘justice’ and the pursuit
5 of the common good may provide justification of the political order, and seek the foundation
6 of political institutions in some form of agreement, consent and choice by the constituents of
7 the political community: the ‘social contract’. Finally, in the 20th century, political
8 philosophers, most notably John Rawls, have advanced social equity as a foundation of
9 legitimacy of a political system, an agenda that has also been picked up explicitly by public
10 administration scholars with specific implications for the field.
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19 These political philosophies are universalistic in thrust, they aim to provide reasons to
20 ascertain the legitimacy of *any* political system and public governance arrangements in the
21 world. True, these bodies of philosophical thought display some idiosyncratic elements
22 linking them to the specific situation where they originated: Plato’s Athens of the 4th century
23 BC had some 20,000 citizens, and both size and the fact philosophical thought occupied a
24 central place amongst its citizens made its population by far more amenable to being
25 educated by philosophers than any contemporary state. Rousseau’s then forming
26 confederation of Switzerland was an inspiring place for conceiving of a social pact amongst
27 kindred spirits, possibly more than any other surrounding country. And Rawls’ emphasis on
28 providing each and every individual with opportunities for fulfilling one’s own life smacks so
29 much of 20th century USA. Yet, albeit having originated in quite specific circumstances,
30 these political philosophies are universally applicable. Their sophisticated formulations have
31 been conceived and honed over the centuries or millennia to be universalistic in thrust: they
32 can be utilised as conceptual tools to analyse and appraise public governance everywhere in
33 the world.
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46 The question then becomes if and how the same can happen for non-Western philosophies:
47 whether they can be applied to analyse and appraise the legitimacy of public governance, or
48 any other public administration topic for that matter – from performance to motivation in
49 public service or any other area of inquiry and practice of the field – in the same
50 universalistic way as Western philosophies are applicable and actually applied. The
51 assumption of this essay is that this could and indeed should be done, i.e. that non-Western
52 philosophies may contribute immensely to the field of public administration globally (not just
53 locally, where they originated), and that the dialogue between Western and non-Western
54 philosophies is of the greatest significance for the advancement of our field globally.
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5 This claim is not put forward naively. It is necessary to examine arduous philosophical
6 questions about whether Western philosophy has since its inception been universalistic in
7 thrust, and Eastern philosophies more idiosyncratic, in a certain sense grown symbiotically
8 with the people, culture and territory where they originated (so Confucianism as the religion-
9 wisdom-philosophy of China, Hinduism as the religion-wisdom-philosophy of India, and so
10 forth)-. These questions require the field of public administration to engage with professional
11 philosophers. Yet, I argue that processes of cultural and intellectual elaboration and
12 mediation could and should be pursued in such ways that they can make Eastern philosophies
13 engage more globally with public administration. And complementarily and equally vitally,
14 Eastern philosophies should join Western philosophies in being taught in public
15 administration programmes at all levels (Ongaro, 2019). This is a logical next step in bringing
16 non-Western philosophies into the public administration discourse.
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