

## Book review

### Philosophy and Public Administration: An Introduction (Second Edition)

By Edoardo Ongaro: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020. 334 pages. Hardback. £85.00. ISBN: 9781839100338

The second edition of *Philosophy and Public Administration* by Edoardo Ongaro (2020) is a much-needed contribution to literature on public administration (hereafter known as PA), public governance and public management, effectively staking claims as to why philosophy *for* PA should command academic attention. The book begins with Ongaro (2020) clearly stating the deficit between contemporary PA literature and ontological, political philosophical and epistemological debates, justifying the work by attempting to “provide the broad picture of the relations between PA and philosophy...to furnish a base for discussion and analysis of a number of the key interconnections between ‘foundational’ philosophical issues and some of the key themes debated [in contemporary PA]” (p. 4).

However, Ongaro (2020) understands the gargantuan task of staking the claims of philosophy *for* PA in meticulous detail, given the 334-page limit of the book. Therefore, Ongaro (2020) repeatedly reminds the reader from the outset that this is but an introduction, which is duly acknowledged as a limitation: “the terrain covered by this work is huge...the choice of themes inevitably needed to be highly selective and very subjective” (p. 25). Therefore, this book provides an enlightening, yet challenging introduction to philosophy *for* PA which, akin to the author, may also bring the reader out of their comfort zone and prompt critical thinking into methods for undertaking research into philosophy *for* PA.

Providing a gentle introduction to the reader, labelled as a comprehensive and accessible work for where the target audience is “scholars, students and practitioners of PA” (Ongaro, 2020, p. 6), the book then follows by providing an express overview of philosophical thought from Pre-Socratic works to early modern thought in chapter two. Chapter three then examines the relevance of philosophical thought *for* PA, appraising thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and the revolution of the subject, alongside facets of philosophical thought such as phenomenology, existentialism and structuralism. Here, Ongaro (2020) effectively introduces the reader to key debates, which vary to different extents their influence upon Ongaro’s (2020) argument of philosophy *for* PA. These chapters, whilst written as introductory may have to be read several times by a newcomer to philosophy, but could also be skipped, as Ongaro (2020) suggests, if the reader considers themselves proficient in philosophical thought. However, this book is self-proclaimed as a monumental challenge, both to the author, but also the reader, particularly given the novelty of attempting to stake claims of philosophy *for* PA as an emerging area.

Chapter 4 delves into the crux of the book, focusing on ontological perspectives and PA doctrines and themes, underpinned by the originality that this work differs from other works on philosophy and PA by beginning from philosophy, then delving into implications *for* PA, as opposed to the other way around. Building upon the introductory philosophical debates in the previous two chapters, Ongaro (2020) utilises chapter 4 to accentuate the importance of ontologies *for* PA and debating their differing utilisations in attempt to foster the rigour and depth *for* PA as a mode of scholarly investigation. Chapter 5 explores political philosophy and the key area highlighted by Ongaro (2020) as the legitimacy of public governance and

the key facet of ‘justification’ in attempt to determine how the public sector should be organised, particularly given contemporary ‘crisis of legitimacy’ questions globally. Overviewing political philosophical arguments such as Plato’s common good, utilitarianism as common good, but also contrasting this by addressing social contractarian arguments, Ongaro (2020) then proceeds to apply this in relation to PA debates. Therefore, Ongaro (2020) effectively constructs an excellent starting point into how PA concepts, such as NPM, could be explained through common good or social contractarian debates.

Following this, chapter 6 examines methodologies and epistemologies of philosophy *for* PA, before then addressing seminal figures different forms of thinking *for* PA in chapter 7. Addressing Lorenzetti’s virtues, Machiavelli’s realism, and More’s utopianism and applying this to PA thinking, chapter 7 is excellent in that three dissimilar masterpieces from across centuries are aptly weaved into PA thinking, staking claims for considering philosophical debates *for* PA, with More’s influence of utopian thinking on ‘best practices’ applied in chapter 8.

Chapter 9 is particularly interesting and pioneering, with Ongaro (2020) tentatively outlining a draft theory of PA change, open to scholars to expand upon in other works. Indeed, this is not expanded upon in this work due to length considerations and straying from the scope of the book, however, this opens numerous ambitious research avenues for scholars who wish to attempt to formulate a philosophically informed theory of PA change.

Finally, chapter 10, excellently, given the seminal nature of the text, outlines how philosophy *for* PA could be best researched, but also taught to students in PA programmes in universities. Indeed, this may be difficult, as noted by the author given different levels of philosophical knowledge amongst PA students, the challenges of technological developments for PA scholars, and how the complex field of philosophy *for* PA can become more widely researched and taught.

This is an excellent book, yet, has limitations, several of which are addressed by the author, such as the introductory and broad scope of the book and the Europe-centric nature of philosophical debates addressed. These limitations are transparently told to us by the author, and no claims are made to cover all corners, so to speak. Yet, this work could be a struggle as an introduction to new students or scholars of PA. Given the complexity of philosophy, and Ongaro (2020) rightly acknowledging the differences in philosophy education in schools across the globe (e.g. UK is minimal, Italy is high), some students may find this ‘introduction’ particularly hard to grasp. Yet, Ongaro (2020) does introduce difficult concepts in accessible ways, so to newcomers to philosophy, with an element of determination, could begin to learn and explore this pioneering and extremely interesting endeavour.

Overall, this is an excellent book that paves the way for numerous novel research avenues, teaching opportunities and has real-world application for PA practitioners. Despite its flaws, largely addressed by the author, this book is a perfect introduction that is likely to be cited by students and scholars of PA for years to come. The eBook version is priced from £22/\$31 from Google Play, ebooks.com and other eBook vendors, while in print the book can be ordered from the Edward Elgar Publishing website.

References:

Ongaro, E. (2020). *Philosophy and Public Administration: An Introduction*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.