

Edoardo Ongaro: *Philosophy and Public Administration: An Introduction*

Ivan Koprić*

UDK: 35.07:321.01(048.1)
35.07:340.12(048.1)

Edoardo Ongaro's book about the philosophical basis of the field of public administration published in 2017 by Edward Elgar Publishing (paperback from 2018, second edition published in 2020) is a highly necessary book by which the author responds to a long overdue issue in administrative science. Geert Bouckaert in his foreword to the book states this using the metaphor of a bridge: "... 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."

Edoardo Ongaro is a Professor of Public Management at the Faculty of Business and Law, Open University, United Kingdom with a prominent international career in the field of public administration. He is Immediate Past President (President for the terms 2013-2016 and 2016-2019) of the European Group for Public Administration (EGPA), the leading learned society for the study and practice of public administration, public governance and public management in Europe, holding many other important academic positions.

* Dr Ivan Koprić, Full Professor and the Head of the Chair of Administrative Science at the Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb, and the president of the Institute of Public Administration, Zagreb, Croatia (redovni profesor i predstojnik Katedre za upravnu znanost Pravnog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu te predsjednik Instituta za javnu upravu, e-mail: ikopric@pravo.hr)

At the beginning of the book, the author makes his gap analysis, in order to present and analyse the gap between literature on the wide variety of PA issues and “key philosophical issues – ontological, political philosophical and epistemological – underlying and grounding any inquiry into these issues” (1). He thoroughly presents the state of the art in this unjustifiably neglected PA subfield, admitting that there have been but rare attempts to treat philosophical bases of public administration in a systematic manner, such as in a volume edited by T. D. Lynch and P. L. Cruise *Handbook of Organization Theory and Management: The Philosophical Approach* (2006).

In the first two parts of the book the author gives a systematic, chronological and thematical account of key philosophical streams, selected from the perspective of a PA scholar. As he stated, he made the selection “partly guided by our own necessarily subjective attribution of significance of strands of philosophical thought for PA studies” (23).

In the first part, he gives an informative overview of pre-Socrates, classical metaphysics, patristic, medieval, and late medieval philosophies, renaissance, early modern philosophy, empiricism, and enlightenment, with excerpts on the dispute over the universals and its contemporary significance, and the scientific revolution during the 16th and 17th centuries, which ended up in the Industrial Revolution of the 18th century.

In the second of these two parts, he analyses Kant’s philosophy, idealism (Fichte, Schelling and Hegel), the thought of Marx and Gramsci, historicism, the sciences of the spirit and the place of values, and Weber, then positivism, conventionalism, and Popper, continuing with phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism, and other key 20th-century strands (including pragmatism, process and analytical philosophies, hermeneutics, post-modernism, personalism, and spiritualism).

The fourth chapter of Ongaro’s book treats public administration doctrines and themes from a philosophical perspective, wishing to “delve into some of the implications (of various philosophical approaches, op. IK) for the study and practice of PA” (111). He analyses Kantian transcendental subject and its main critic (the relativist and post-modernist school), critical realism (accentuating the significance of Aristotle’s four causes for PA and social sciences), Positivism, neo-Positivism and post-Positivism, structuralism, neo-Marxism and the thought of Gramsci, the existentialist public administrator, phenomenology and realist phenomenology in PA, historicism, time in the study and practice of PA, potentiality and actuality, of necessity / of possibility, the contemporary meaning of the dispute

over the universals, and methods, epistemology and logics of inquiry in PA.

In the fifth chapter Ongaro explores the relations between political philosophy and public governance from “the key question of ‘justification’” (153). The issue there is “the quest for justification in ‘common good’ and in ‘social contract’ arguments and their significance for the debate on the organisation of the public sector” (153). In this chapter Ongaro analyses Plato’s conception of ‘common good’, utilitarianism as a variant of common good arguments, social contract perspectives, John Rawls’ theory of justice, and personalism and communitarianism. Finally, he revises governance, administrative and managerial doctrines in the light of justification arguments.

The sixth chapter deals with virtues, realism and utopian thinking in public administration through the analysis of thoughts of A. Lorenzetti (virtues), N. Machiavelli (realism), and Th. More (Utopia). The chapter concludes with an exploration of utopias, ideal-types, paradigms, and models of ‘good practices’ as possible conceptual tools for public administration.

The book is concluded by the author’s plea for consistency in treating philosophical traditions of public administration. He built on the Raadschelders’ typology of intellectual traditions in public administration that differentiates PA as practical wisdom, PA as practical experience, PA as scientific knowledge, and Relativism and postmodernist vision of PA, trying to revise the intellectual traditions based on his own insights into relevant philosophical grounds. Finally, Ongaro presents his thought about potential impacts of new technologies, genetics and the ICT, in the light of philosophical arguments he holds relevant in dealing with PA aspects of these technologies.

Ongaro hopes that differentiation of philosophy for PA, philosophy of PA, and mapping backwards from the PA field to philosophical thought may provoke greater interest and further investigation into exploration of the relationship between philosophy and the field of public administration, and that “philosophy ... will be recognized more and more as a reference of central significance for the development of the field of PA” (233).

Edoardo Ongaro’s book *Philosophy and Public Administration* is an exciting, attractive and inspiring book for public administration scientists, scholars, researchers, practitioners, and students. Moreover, a wider community of social scientists may well profit from it, since the author gives numerous connections and remarks about the links between social sciences and philosophy. Last but not least, I am convinced that philosophers

may also learn from this book, looking into the close ties of philosophy and a practical field such as public administration.

Although having many insightful, sometimes even fascinating elements, this book is certainly not a book for an easy and fast reading. While reading, I was unintentionally moved back to my student times, using my pencil to underline important classifications, ideas, and comments, to be able to easily find interesting moments during further readings. Although I have already learnt a lot from it, I will certainly use this book frequently while conceptualising my research, theorising about public administration, writing the papers, and preparing my lectures. That is Edoardo Ongaro's book tremendous contribution and this is why it is well worth reading.

At least three moments are especially important to me. First, after this book we will not only have an opportunity but also a kind of obligation to situate our research into philosophical 'coordinate system' developed by Ongaro and be aware where in this system our own contributions should be placed. Secondly, I share a hope with him that PA scholars will increasingly often found their work on thoroughly chosen philosophical grounds, and not so much on the fashionable but not well-thought concepts that make some parts of our discipline poorly relevant in scientific or/and practical terms. Finally, as Wolfgang Drechsler in his Postscript to the book points out, I do hope courses in philosophy will become a standard within PA study programmes.

This is why I wish to warmly recommend Edoardo Ongaro's book *Philosophy and Public Administration* to the community of public administration scholars, practitioners and students, as well as to other social scientists.