A pantheon of public values: an historical and conceptual approach to the normativity of facts and values

Rutgers, M.R.

Citation for published version (APA):
The Pantheon of Public Values
An historical and conceptual approach to the normativity of facts and values¹

Mark R. Rutgers, University of Amsterdam
Graduate School of Social Sciences
Kloveniersburgwal 48, 1012CX Amsterdam, The Netherlands
+31(0)205253774
M.R.Rutgers@UvA.Nl

¹ This paper is based on my inaugural lecture, University of Amsterdam February 11th 2011.
Abstract:

The enormous diversity of possible public values seems to require a pantheon to house them, yet, even though this pantheon is a public temple, it is crowded with statutes of individual gods and goddesses.

This paper deals with two intertwined issues concerning the nature of public values, both rely on misunderstanding the conceptual nature of values. First, the epistemological separation of facts and values, and second the ontological reductionist view of public values as ultimately having an individualistic foundation.

The impossibility to delineating the number of (public) values results from the normativity of administrative reality: values are not simply separable from facts. Contrary to the common opinion, it are not the facts that matter, but the values; or rather facts only matter in terms of being valued as relevant. If values and fact are both analyzed in terms of different uses of concept, we should be aware of the possible factual and valuational impact of all concepts, especially in a political-administrative context that (indirectly) relies on a fact-value distinction to begin with.

Second, the increased awareness of the importance and relevance of public values obscures that at closer examination, most authors actually have an individualistic ontology, i.e., public values are regarded as only existing in terms of individual values. However, even though individuals are the carriers or agents of public values, this does not warrant the (dominant) interpretation is that individuals are the prime, if not only source of values. This (again) overlooks the conceptual nature of values. Values as (linguistic) concepts are social constructs, and as such not simply the prerogative of individuals. What people value, what they can value, is determined and delineated by the social context. Just as there is no individual language, there are no individual values in the sense usually attributed to them. As a consequence it is of importance to capture the social nature of public values in order to better understand their meaning and origins.
The Pantheon of Public Values
An historical and conceptual approach to the normativity of facts and values

Mark R. Rutgers

Introduction

The world of governance and public administration is a reality of policies, laws, regulations, memo’s and reports: a world of words, words capturing facts and expressing values; facts with regard to the nature of social reality, and values indicating what is right or wrong and what to do or ignore. If only it was this simple!

A fact is perhaps not so very factual; there is always debate possible on the starting point used to establish a specific fact. This is perhaps not immediately obvious when talking about everyday observations such as ‘it is raining’ or ‘my cat is climbing the tree’, but in the case of complex social issues that are a core concern of public administration it is just as easily noticeable that facts are not so straightforward. A prime example is the discussion about the relevant facts concerning global warming and the subsequent action to be undertaken or voided. In such cases facts are more easily recognized as constructs and dependant on the way we view reality. Even then, it is not the facts as such that matter, but which ones are regarded relevant or meaningful. The political-administrative universe is concerned with meaningful facts, i.e., valuable facts. This does not imply that facts are a simple matter of political choice, for, as for instance Frank Fischer (19**) has shown, also the more abstract and objective approaches (methodologies) applied in policy research will result in different evaluations. Meaningful or valuable in the context of public administration is thus dependent on both the (political) view on ‘the good society’ and the way to get there, as well as, methodological demands we may apply for determining what facts are to be valued as true or certain.

Public administration concerns values. That’s what Hodgkinson meant when he stated: “Administration is philosophy in action” (Hodgkinson, 1982, p. 3). Assessing the value of information is an essential part of the work of public functionaries; what Self referred to as ‘appraisal’ (1982, p. 192- ). This may vary from assessing the visual impact of a new building to the risks of a terrorist attack. De criteria for judging relevance and meaning in all such assessments are public values: is it legal, efficient, democratic, is it a public concern to begin with?

Public values have a central position in public administration. However, in everyday political-administrative practice there seems to be a kind of ‘facts fetishism’. Preferably, and copying business practices, all actions are registered in detailed hour overviews, and – even at universities – day to day administrative reality seems more concerned with ‘objectifiable’,

---

2 This paper is based on my inaugural lecture, University of Amsterdam February 11th 2011.
evidence based, publication demands, student success ratio’s and contact hours. The normative starting points too easily are out of the picture, especially when matters of value have to be reduced to monetary data that fit the constraints of the budget.

Awareness of the central importance of values for our understanding of public administration has increased in the past decade. The intrinsically value ingrained or normative nature of all public administration has to become even more central to the field. Apparently objective terms such as ‘civil servant’, ‘management’ and ‘bureaucracy’ do have many different associations and thus result in different value judgments or appraisals, especially outside academia.

For instance, the very common and seemingly purely descriptive term ‘policy’ is normative at closer examination. Policy makers are supposed to deal with policies and not with politics, for obviously the latter is the privileged subject of politicians. This is less evident if we take a comparative perspective: In Dutch there is the rather curious situation that there is a word for the singular ‘policy’ (‘beleid’), but there is no plural available. Whereas in Dutch there exist no ‘policies’, in French and German there is no straightforward equivalent at all: Thus German civil servants are simply concerned with developing politics (‘Politik’), as no distinction exists (apart from using for instance planning – ‘Planung’ - but that’s not exactly the same). Central to the absence of ‘policy’ is that the distinction between policy and politics became regarded fictional in the later 19th century (and there is some truth in that!). Public administration is a linguistic, social, normative construct: we can talk meaningfully about policy and policies as distinct for politics in English, but that is not necessarily so in other times and places.

What public values are at the heart of public administration? Over the centuries there has been an awful lot of debate on the possible core values and which one’s government and public administration should be concerned with. This varies from justice, freedom, democracy, health, to drinking water, education, loyal bureaucrats, and children’s playgrounds. But what is at stake when we call such rather divers concepts public values?

2.

Simply put public values are values that concern the general interest. Let me provide a working definition: Public values are enduring belief on the organization of and activities in society that are regarded as crucial (positively or negatively) for the sustainability of that society, the wellbeing of its members, and, in relation to this, the nature and behavior of those – the public functionaries – that have to ensure the public values are attained and maintained.

In brief, public values concern the general interest and the notion of ‘the good society’. Private values can be opposed to these public values as values that are regarded as important by an individual or Group for themselves. Public and private values can coincide, but oppose one another.
One of the few authors to outline the nature of public values in the study of public administration is Barry Bozeman. He provides a more specific definitions: “A society’s ‘public values’ are those providing normative consensus about (a) the rights, benefits, and prerogatives to which citizens should (and should not) be entitled; (b) the obligations of citizens to society, the state, and one another; and (c) the principles on which governments and policies should be based” (Bozeman, 2007, p.13). Interestingly, Bozeman opposes public values to public interests. His ‘workable definition’ of the latter reads: “In a particular context, the public interest refers to the outcomes best serving the long-run survival and wellbeing of a social collective as a ‘public’” (Bozeman, 2007, p.12). This implies public interest is not a matter of consensus is seems: “A most important distinction between public interest and public value is that …. ’public interest’ is an ideal, whereas ‘public values’ have specific, identifiable content.” (p.12). Thus Bozeman tries to elegantly define away a major problem of distinguishing between public values as fairly changeable, versus the idea of some objective, ‘ideal’ perception of what is good for society: the summum bonum. Alternatively, what is accepted as ‘ideal’ and/or generally shared ideas concerning the survival of society as a whole, is in fact a matter of some public values having become accepted as such. I.e., some public values have more general acceptance, are perhaps not even recognized as public values, but as ‘truths’. The latter probably because they are so general and vague, such as the need for procreation, food, (some) social cohesion, and so on. I suggest therefore to simply stick to the notion of public values as being regarded in the (or a perceived) general interest. Whether or not there is some kind of (temporary or enduring) consensus, concern a different question and can be left out of the definition of public values as such. Alternatively, we have to reflect on the political mechanisms that create and change public values. Thus ‘democracy’ is an example of what is precisely an enduring, idealized public value to begin with.

3. What and how many values are actually at stake here? The title of this paper - the pantheon of public values – refers to this topic. Without even attempting to enumerate the possible public values, the pantheon can be used as a metaphor for the encompassing collection of all possible public values to be showcased and possibly even worshipped.

The original pantheon is a temple in Rome dating from the year 125. This temple was famously devoted to all gods or divinities in the Roman Empire: it is the original ‘hall of fame.’ The very term pantheon also is used to refer to the totally of divinities that is worshipped (sometimes in a more limited sense as the denoting the divinities in a specific culture (for instance, ‘the Greek pantheon’). As denoting all possible divinities, the pantheon contains a rather eclectic if not anarchistic company of principal and less well known, even very obscure gods, goddesses, and the like. There may be almost identical divinities, some with close family ties, but also some completely at odds with each other’s very existence. The expression ‘the pantheon of public values’ captures in a similar way a more or less concrete, as well as, abstract collection(s) of public values, even if they are unsure about the mutual relations, hierarchy, and even if these public values can coexist at all. Thus in the most

3 Actually, there was an earlier pantheon dating from 27 B.C., but the still existing building is 150 years younger.
abstract case, it refers to all public values ever identified as such, irrespective of their origin and compatibility, and in a more concrete and limited sense it can denote, for instance, the combined public values in Mark Moore’s (2005) book, the values of the Founding Fathers of the United States, as well as the public values acknowledged in liberalism.

What values can we put into our pantheon if we are looking for public values that any public administer should take to heart? There is even a vow for this: ‘to pantheonize’. Let me present three examples how we might perhaps proceed.

First of all, we can pay attention to classic authors. Take Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 121-180), philosopher and top administrator. Aurelius reigned the Roman Empire for 161 to 180. He is regarded as the ultimate just and humane ruler: “a man of supreme integrity” (McLynn, 2010: 141).

Aurelius’ personal reflections on his office have been kept, even though they were never intended to become public. They provide a unique insight into the mindset of a Roman emperor: how, he as a human being and ruler deal with everyday affairs, and not in the last place, with his mortality. His work has been praised by Christian authors, as well as by Darwin and Nietzsche. His more recent popularity is inspired by former US president Bill Clinton’s declared that a got much comfort from reading Aurelius whilst being in office.

Aurelius enumerates many personal values and virtues, but the highest qualities in human existence for him are justice, truth, self-control and courage (2006, p. 19; book 3: 6). When it is crucial for an administrator to decide, it is important to do always act with good consideration and just, with sincerity and always avoid being distracted by your passions, having an open mind: “And you will achieve this vacation if you perform each action as if it were the last of your life; freed, that is, from all lack of aim, from all passion-led deviation from the ordinance of reason, from pretence, from love of self, from dissatisfaction with what fate has dealt you” (2006, p. 11; Book 2: 5).

To Aurelius duty and society’s interest should always come first, and is at the core of individual action: “All that happens to the individual is to the benefit of the Whole. ... But if you look more closely you will also see as a general rule that what benefits one person benefits other people too…” (2006, p. 55; Book 6: 45). This is not a call for sheer individualism, for: “What does not benefit the hive does not benefit the bee either” (2006, p. 57; Book 6: 54). This is even more stressed by stating: “Just as you are yourself a complementary part of a social system, so too your every action should complement a life of social principle” (2006, p. 88; Book 9: 23). In Aurelious' reflections personal and public values prove to ultimately coincide. It does not imply some ‘invisible hand’ transforming individual passions and actions into a common good, but to the contrary it implies that societies good should be at the heart of personal decisions.

Aurelius refers to many values that are relevant for a public functionary, what is surprisingly lacking is reflections on the nature of governance, public administration and the state. This is interesting as such: the personal burden of the emperor is huge, but he never doubts the importance of his function and its duties; to the contrary.
Finally, we can find a forerunner of the Thomas Theorem in Marcus Aurelius’ reflections: “All is as thinking makes it so” (2006, p. 14; Book 2: 15):\textsuperscript{4} Perhaps a good text to put on the facade of our pantheon of public values.

4. For our second illustration we jump fourteen centuries forward to encounter Baldesar Castiglione. Whereas Aurelius never intended his reflections to become public, Castiglione explicitly aimed to enlighten others in his Il libro del Cortegiano – the book of the courtier – written in between 1513 and 1516, and published in Venice in 1528. He narrates about four (fictitious) evenings at the plaice at Urbino where (really existing) people discuss on what makes a good courtier, i.e., what we may consider the forerunner of the public functionary. Again and again ideas are presented, and objections rose concerning the values that are needed for the monarch prime servants to do their business. Many possibly relevant values and skills are pointed at. The profession of the courtier is, for instance, compared with the warrior: brave and determined towards the enemy, but anywhere else modest and undemanding. The skills of the courtier has to command are, for instance, hunting and sports, music, friendliness in interaction, and also eloquence and writing skills. Knowledge is important, for what otherwise to talk and write about: “He must be more than averagely educated in the sciences, at least in what we call the humanities …” (Castiglione, 1528/1991, p. 75).\textsuperscript{5} In political matter the courtier should be prudent and wise, and above all aim for the good.

Also the perfect courtesan is supposed to possess all these qualities: the noble woman is regarded the equal of the courtier (p. 232). This reflects Castiglione’s Renaissance image of humanity: man and woman are not essentially different.\textsuperscript{6}

Finally the relation with the monarch or prince is discussed in terms of the question how to have an open relationship and be frank about the truth: ‘speaking truth to power’ in modern jargon: “The prince lack more than anyone what he needs more than anything in affluence, namely people that tell him the truth and remind him of the good” (p. 255). Who else can remind him of the good, but his nearest servant? There is no better praise than calling a monarch a great administrator and therefore finding good servants is so important.

Castiglione ends his book by concluding that the final purpose of the courtier is to be the monarch teacher (p. 289).

What can we learn from Castiglione? The courtier is the historical forerunner of the contemporary civil servant and ministers or secretary of state. We can notice similar ideals, but also differences. Castiglione exemplifies that there is a discourse\textsuperscript{7} concerning the values

\textsuperscript{4} In this first mentioning it is actually presented as a quote, not as his own thought. But it recurs twice in book 12 (12.8 en 12.22). In 12.22 he adds the optimistic sounding, “and you control your thinking.”
\textsuperscript{5} Translations of Castiglione’s quotes by me from a Dutch text.
\textsuperscript{6} ‘Just like no stone can be more perfectly a stone than any other in as far as it concerns the essence of stone concerns, and the one piece of wood cannot be more perfectly be wood than any other, thus the one human being cannot be more perfectly human than another, and thus the man is not more perfect than the women, where it concerns substance, as both are ‘human’ and the differences between them are insignificant inconsequential not essential (Castiglione, 1528/1991, p. 191).
\textsuperscript{7} By discourse I mean: ‘the continued, enduring and interactive exchange, creation, and debate of shared interpretations (meanings)’ (Rutgers, 2003, p. 12; cf. Schreurs, 2000, p.15). Discourse does not concern a trivial
for what we would nowadays call the public service. Some values were apparently widely accepted, others debated and some are clearly absent, such as democracy and efficiency. In what is being discussed it becomes visible what the value universe (‘his pantheon’) looked like.

The book of the courtier was originally forbidden by the Roman Catholic Church, possibly because of the modern equal image of human nature, but more likely because a religion is blatantly absent as a possible source for public values in his discussions.

5.

For the last illustration we jump merely five centuries forward to the present: what values are around in present day discourse on public administration literature?

In 2005 Petra Schreurs traced 63 values in a survey of public administration literature. The next year Torben Beck-Jørgensen and Barry Bozeman identified 72 values, and in 2008 I argued that in a brief literature and document survey 94 values could easily be found. What is more, this enumeration can easily be added to (for instance ‘innovation’ and ‘punctuality’). Any attempt to list values is superficial anyway, as the terms still can refer to different concepts. Take for instance ‘responsibility’: this is sometimes interpreted in the context of citizenship, or ministerial responsibility. Similarly ‘loyalty’ can be used as synonymous with reliability, moral connectedness, or duty. The terms are but indexes that may hide a multitude of fairly similar, but also incommensurate meanings (cf. Rutgers, 2008, p. 95-96).

This will flood our pantheon of public values rather quickly; what characterizes public values, or how they relate to one another remains obscure in an enumeration. Ordering or classification is what we need. But, as I have argued elsewhere (2008) most classification used in the study of public administration lack a sound justification for their selection criteria. Montgomery Van Wart can be used as an example here. He employs two different classifications in his book. In the first part he groups all values in five types or categories: personal, professional, organizational, legal and ‘general interest values’. He simply refers to the ethical code of the American Society of Public Administration (the ASPA Code of Ethics) as its warranty. Nut why these five categories and not four or six? Van Wart resolves this

exchange of ideas, but ‘concerns the creation of a reality we can disagree and can quarrel about. It presents the way we (re)produce a sense of stability, order and predictability and thereby create a sustainable, functioning and meaningful world to live in. In this sense a discourse constitutes the very fabric of social reality’ (p. 12-13). This is closely related to Foucault’s (1971) original meaning.

Accountability, accuracy, anonymity, capacity, care, career mobility, centralization, commitment, competence, compliance, continuity, cost control, courteous, creativity, customer friendly, decentralization, democratic, deregulation, devotion, diligence, discretion, disinterested, duty, duty not to go on strike, duty to advise, duty to remonstrate, effectiveness, efficiency, equal division of offices, equality, ethical conduct, exclusiveness, experienced, factuality, fair compensation, fairness, flexibility, generalist, honor, humility, impartiality, integrity, justness, leadership, legality, legitimacy, loyalty, managerial discretion, merit, ministerial responsibility, mobility, modesty, necessity, neutrality, not be rash, not falsify decrees, non-partisanship, obedience, objectivity, openness, performance, pluralistic, plurality, prestige, productivity, professionalism, promptness, quality, quick, reliability, representativeness, respectability, responsibility, responsiveness, secrecy, selflessness, sense of calling, sense of service, social equity, specialization, superiority, sympathetic, systematization, trained, transparency, truthful, uniformity, viability, visibility, wise, worker health, worker safety.
question by just stating that five provides adequate possibilities to distinguish, without resulting in too much overlap (Van Wart, 1998, p. 5).

In the second part of his book Van Wart does take a theoretically legitimized basis for his classification: ‘a cultural framework perspective’ which he derives from the influential author on organization culture Edgar Schein9 (Van Wart, 1998: 166; cf. Brocklehurst, 1998, p. 452). However, Schein distinguishes three cultural levels,10 and Van Wart uses four, without providing the arguments why he deviates from Schein; in fact readers unfamiliar with Schein will not even notice. What is more, Van Wart points out that no consistency is to be expected between the different levels, possibly not even within any of the levels as such. The ‘cultural framework’, on the one hand, provides a means to order the chaotic multitude of values around, but, on the other hand, also lack precision and clear criteria to attribute a value to one of the levels.

To conclude, Van Wart cannot provide clear, well argued criteria to identify values and ascribe them to specific classes or groups. As he notes, even consistency is not to be expected as values can be attributed to several classes at the same time. It should be noted that this is certainly not a unique problem in Van Wart’s work; he’s just used as an example here because he is in fact more explicit and elaborate than most other authors.11

Torben Beck-Jørgensen and Barry Bozeman (2006) also explore “the boundaries and meanings of public value.” They identify seven categories or, as they refer to them, ‘constellations’ of public values. As in the case of Van Wart, the categories have amply overlap, i.e., the same values can occur in more than one class. The constellations are based on ‘relationship’ identified in terms of ‘nodal values’ such as ‘human dignity’ or integrity’. These nodal values have relations with many other values, but are not necessarily the most important values themselves, if only because their very meaning is a matter of debate. Building on Beck-Jørgensen and Bozeman I would suggest that it precisely the indeterminate and debated nature that makes these values central to a discourse. Thus ‘integrity’ is a central value because it is linked to many different values, in varying ways by different authors. There is, as Beck-Jørgensen and Bozeman suggest, a cluster or field of values concerning ‘integrity’: honesty, sincerity, morality, loyalty, and also integrity itself surface in this cluster. Thus the term integrity can be used to refer to a specific value (a specific concept), as well as to the cluster or constellation of values. Nevertheless, clear criteria for constructing a cluster are difficult to establish, apart from identifying the contingent associations by means of empirical research, or as resulting from the researchers associations.

Both Van Wart and Beck-Jørgensen and Bozeman show that it is not easy to identify and order public values. We may wonder what it is that we are actually collecting to present in our pantheon. In other words:

9 Schein is one of the most influential authors on organizational culture (cf. Brocklehurst, 1998, p. 452).
11 Although all classification in the social sciences proves to be problematic as exclusive classes are hard to construct (cf. Feger, 2001), this does not imply that criteria for selection and ordering are totally absent, or that the principles and assumption used to classify can remain hidden.
What are values? Sills points out that values are intimately related to interest, preferences, pleasures, duties, desires, needs, and so on (cf. Mittelstrass, 1984, p. 622): “One of the more widely accepted definitions in the social science literature considers values to be conceptions of the desirable, influencing selective behavior” (Sills, 1968: 283). Broadly conceived a value is any concept that expresses a positive or negative statement. Thus Perry very concisely captures the meaning of values as follows: “A value is anything of interest to a human subject” (Perry, cited by Sills, 1968, p. 283; cf. Rescher, 1982, p. 4).

In the late 19th and early 20th century an attempt was made to construct an encompassing and comprehensive value theory or axiology: Without success. The diversity and pluriformity of values proved to defy a unifying theory of values. Every attempt to provide a definition of value results in enumerating synonyms and/or illustrations. One of the later authors, William Stern, makes the interesting observation that value is a base or fundamental concept that cannot be reduced to any other concept.12 It should, however, be noted that it is not self evident that an everyday term, such as value, can be captured in one concise concept at all. Even if we think we can succeed in doing so, there are always so called ‘essentially contested concepts’.13 These essentially contested concepts are precisely core concepts we use to identify and delineate important areas of social action and of research: power, integrity, politics, or public administration. This inherent difficulty to grasp core concepts doesn’t imply we cannot reflect on the nature of values to gain more insight.

Sometimes the meaning of ‘value’ is crystal clear: for instance, when an expert in a television program such as ‘the Antiques Road Show’ states “This has only sentimental, no real value.” It indicates that ‘real value’ can be expressed in monetary terms.

Value is not something, but something has value (Stern, 1927: 41). This means that we give something – an idea, an object, a phantasy – a positive or negative meaning; we judge or evaluate it from some perspective. Something can thus have a monetary value, but also an emotional, such as a memory, or a perception of beauty. Values are concepts we use to give meaning and significance to reality: we judge or qualify something as (amongst others) beauty, courage, honest or holy, or to the contrary as ugly, cowardice, deceitful or devilish.

What we have found is a very open meaning of value that is perhaps of little help to differentiate between concepts: values seem to concern almost everything. Is my preference for cappuccino over black coffee indeed an expression of a value? Yes and no, I will argue.

Let us first take a different route and have a look at what ‘valuing’ as an activity in which we do qualify something as funny, innovative, boring, uninteresting, anything that may apply to a paper such as this, i.e. to evaluate. To value or evaluate always is done from a specific perspective. Thus a policy can be regarded as good or bad, depending on whether the evaluation takes as its focus whether the policy in question is democratic, effective, or legally sound. To value presupposes a measure or norm in the light of which something is appraised. This norm has to be derived from a value (such as ‘democratic’), but it can also be a norm

12 ‘Eine Definition des Wertbegriffes ist nicht möglich; denn es gibt keinen anderen elementaren Begriff, auf den er zurückgeführt werden könnte’ (Stern, 1927: 41).
13 This expression is usually attributed to Connolly (1984)
resulting from personal preference (‘I prefer cappuccino’). There is always a judgment and this evaluation can be reasoned in terms of the values or preferences used in doing so.

It seems however better not to regard the evaluations in terms of personal preferences as valuations or evaluations in the proper sense. Without delving too deep into the issue here, preferences are of a ‘lesser status’ than values, clearly a preference is not equaled to what is possibly a personal value such as ‘my honor’. It is in any case a much less convincing argument if a personal preference provides the basis for valuing. Personal preferences are primarily regarded as valid reasons in the case of purely personal affairs. Thus I can prefer cappuccino, but that will not convince anyone else it is indeed of higher value to do so. On the other hand, to state that some policy is illegal cannot so easily be discarded and is open to proof and debate.

Values, certainly public values, do play a role in argumentation. This is at the heart of the approach taken by Nicolas Rescher. He states: ‘A value represents a slogan for the ‘rationalization’ of action’ (Rescher, 1982, p. 9; ital. in orr.). Values function as arguments in rational argumentation concerning what to do or do not, and are central in so called ‘practical reason’, i.e., in decisions on, and legitimizations of, our choices and actions: “To have a value is to be able to give reasons for motivating goal-oriented behavior in terms of benefits and costs, bringing to bear explicitly a conception of what is in a man’s interest and what goes against his interest” (Rescher, 1982, p. 10).

Is Rescher pushing it too far if he regards values as arguments in rational deliberation? Well, no, in as far as it is not so extreme to do so: 14 even the most subjective and emotional values (and even preferences) can be used as an argument.

On the one hand, Rescher starts by discussing the role of values in the rationalization of actions. Rationalization often is regarded as the provision of arguments after a decision or act (certainly in psychology it has this ad post meaning). On the other hand, this cannot be the sole meaning for Rescher, as he states that values have a function in ‘practical reasoning’, i.e., the arguments used to arrive at a solution (so not afterwards) to resolve a practical, especially moral (‘pragmatic’), problem (cf. Honderich, 1995: 709). 15

The previous underlines what I referred to at the beginning as the intrinsically value ingrained nature of public administration. Actions in the sphere of public administration have to be legitimized by means of values ranging from traditionally very important ones such as justice, to more modern and secondary as client friendliness. The value loadedness of human reality can be captured in terms of normativity. Normativity is used as an encompassing notion. Railton (2000) regards it even the most important concept used by philosophers to refer to a number of crucial, but very diffuse human phenomena: “Ethics, aesthetics, epistemology,

---

14 For instance Raz (2000: 34) argues that all normativity is closely linked with reason and rationality. Also Dancy makes a close connection between normativity and rationality: “Now nobody denies that the notion of a reason is central to that of normativity” (Dancy, 2000: viii).
15 I would argue that rational argumentation and rationalization afterwards are closely related (cf. Rutgers & Schreurs, 2003).
rationality, semantics – all these areas of philosophical inquiry draw us into a discussion of normativity” (Railton, 2000, p. 1).

A norm is simply put a measure or gauge; a specific standard used to assess something. ‘Normal’ is a common, to be expected state of affairs. Thus, the statement, ‘it is normal for a student to finish his studies on time’, is normative in a descriptive sense. Normative is not in opposition to descriptive or factual, and thus not limited to valuations, evaluations, and prescriptions. The distinction between facts and values that is often treated as unproblematic if not self-evident is at stake here. The notion that facts and values can be entirely separated, is what Hillary Putnam calls a ‘thought - stopper’ (2002, p. 44) misleadingly implying that all values are just irrational and subjective preferences, contrary to ‘facts’ that have some objective status.

The plausibility of the bifurcation entirely depends upon the possibility to keep ‘facts’ pure, i.e., unaffected by a human observer. This is impossible, and hardly a point of discussion ever since Karl Popper pointed out that all observation is theory loaded or guided. Humans do not simply receive objective information; there is always interpretation and appraisal (cf. Dancy, 2000: xiii-xiv), in other words, we select and give meaning to our perceptions. As Putnam states: “values and normativity permeate all of experience” (2002, p. 30). The recognition that all meaning is normative is influential amongst present-day philosophers. For instance, Rothstein (1975, p. 307) argues that both facts and values constitute arguments that can be evaluated in terms of coherence, reasonableness, and correspondence with the existing body of knowledge. This fits nicely with Rescher’s interpretation of values as rational arguments. Rothstein concludes that the fact-value distinction is only analytic and nothing more (1975, p. 308). This implies that the everyday distinction between facts and values does not exist in reality, but only in our thinking: ‘everything is as thought.’

---

16 A dictionary states Norm: “something that is usual, typical or standard” and also “a required standard: a level to be complied with or reached” [New Oxford Dictionary] and ‘Normal’ “conforming to a standard: usual, typical or expected.”

17 “Understood in a sufficiently wide sense, the topic of fact and value is a topic which is of concern to everyone.” (Putnam, 1981, p.127).

18 The thesis of the normativity of meaning originates in the work by Kripke (1982). Building on Wittgenstein, he argues that the descriptive theory of meaning should be rejected, which implies that contents is normative (Boghossian, 2003, p. 31). Kripke and others argue that in naturalistic theories a normative vocabulary plays a central role, i.e., arguments are made in terms of “the vocabulary of ‘correctness’, ‘justification’, ‘rationality’, and ‘norm’” (Gampel, 1997, p. 221). But even more, there is general skepticism regarding the possibility of ‘meaning facts’. The idea is not that imperatives (‘ought’s’) are dependent upon meanings (which is obviously so), but rather that imperatives create meaning (Gibbard, 2003, p. 84/5). This is entirely at odds with the naturalistic idea of a ‘thoughtless world: “meaning is essentially normative, and thus falls in a class with such things as rules, values, goodness, and virtue” (Gampel, 1997, p. 230).

Starting point is that meaningful terms require rules for their application (cf. Boghossian, 2005, p. 205). To be able to formulate correctly we have to apply terms according to their rules of application: “If I mean something by an expression … then I should use it in certain ways” (Wikforss, 2001, p. 2; cf Hattiangadi, 2006, p. 220). At a minimum this implies that the normativity of meaning results in blurring the boundaries between normative and non-normative (i.e., between facts and values) (cf. Gibbard, 2003, p. 84).

Of course there are also counter arguments around; both against the normativity of meaning, as against its implications for naturalism (cf. Hattiangadi, 2006; Papineau & Tanney 1999).
The values on which we base our norms are socially determined. They are to a high degree shared in a society or culture, even though there will be no clarity on the precise meaning and there is space for discussion on the relevant norm (‘is this justified or not?’). This is not essentially different from debating whether something is red or orange, even though it seems easier to arrive at a shared norm for deciding on naming a color, which is much more tricky in the case of complex social (and thus moral) values.

Values do have a cultural embedding and origin. This reflects in Ricoeur’s (2004) notion that the appropriation of a value is not some isolated, solitary phenomenon, but always is mediated by ‘the other’: it is not a purely individual event, but relational in time and space. This links with Rescher’s observation that values are interpersonal and therefore in a sense impersonal. We cannot simply pose or invent values ourselves; values characterize a culture and group; valuing is a socially established (learned) phenomenon.

Another characteristic of values is that they are attributed a high level of durability or permanence, and also as being articulate. John Rohr’s description of values captures this: “A ‘value’ in the life of a person as well as in a nation suggests a pattern of attitudes or behavior that recurs with some frequency. An attitude or a passion or a principle must have a history – either personal or societal – before it becomes a ‘value’” (Rohr, 1989, p. 77/8; Rohr, 1998, p. 25). The permanence implies that values are characteristic of a person, i.e., constitutes his/her personality. In a similar vein this applies to societies and their values, i.e., culture is constituted by a set of core values (and rituals, customs, and so on).

Next to a broad, open approach to values, a more limited definition can also be established: values as providing direction to individuals and societies actions, that is, as the values that are used to decide between goals and means. A more substantial concept of values, according to Rescher, is therefore connected to an individual’s personality, in particular “a vision of the good life” and “a vision of how life ought to be lived” (Rescher, 1982, p. 10) both for oneself and for others.

Values are thus not contingent preferences, but concern someone’s attitude towards life, or they constitute the cultural identity of a collective. The earlier provided definition of public values is but a subclass: the ideas and norms concerning ‘the good society’ and ‘the general interest’, i.e., the sustainability of society and the wellbeing of its members, irrespective the immediate personal preferences or interests.

Transposed to administrative practice, normativity entails that also facts – descriptions and explanations – are value ingrained and thus open to dispute. What matters, certainly in public administration, what value we assign to a fact. Even if we agree on the construction of our facts - what we can call the first order normativity - it is the assessment of these established facts - what we can call the second order normativity - that matters. Thus we can agree on what it means to work or to have a safe environment. Based on the observations made we can

---

19 A parallel can be made here with the description of virtues by Aristotle: virtues as ‘states of character’ (Aristotle, 1980, II.5).
conclude whether the described reality is evaluated positively, negatively or neutral, and finally we may conclude to specific actions (or not): prescriptions can be made. That is, finally a third order normativity.

In administrative practice the distinction between facts and values is extra difficult because many terms have no fixed or clear meaning. That makes it difficult to assess whether a term is used descriptive or evaluative to begin with, or whether it is a positive or negative evaluation. It underlines the remark by Rothstein that the fact-value distinction is only analytical and can thus ‘evaporate’ in social practice as making sense on providing guidance in establishing meaning. Take for example the statement ‘this is a bureaucratic organization’. Is it a description? Or an evaluation? If the latter, is it intended positively or negatively? Clearly we need to take into consideration the context of the discourse in which such a statement is made in order to make sense and to accept or reject the statement.

How we describe has consequences for possible valuations en thus for prospective actions and expectations. The normativity of concepts implies that factual statements in a sense invite us, or even force us, to make a (second order) value judgment or valuation; they imply a hypothetical judgment.20

In the literature on concepts we can encounter the mixing of fact and values in discussions on so called ‘thick concepts’ (Putnam, 2002, p. 35). These are regarded as being simultaneously descriptive and evaluative. Examples are ‘cruel’ and ‘friendly’. I would argue that almost all, if not simply all, concepts in natural languages can have both a descriptive and evaluative meaning. For instance, ‘Turn right after the ugly building’ makes a purely evaluative term being used for obvious descriptive purposes, just like ‘blond’ can be used descriptive as well as evaluative and even both at the same time. Many descriptive terms are associated with, or used as evaluative terms. Thus there are references to ‘the traditional professional’, ‘the new work arrangements’ and ‘normalization of civil servants employment status.’ Sometimes an academic ‘hypothetic valuation’ is but an euphemism for what in everyday discourse is simply manipulative. Attention for framing in politics is closely related to these phenomena; the way we describe something is normatively loaded and influences behavior and attitudes. Are we discussing fellow human beings or illegal immigrants, religion or ideology, ‘sickness tax’ or ‘collective health insurance?’ It again shows the intertwinement of facts and values. Within the sciences we may attempt to make our descriptions as value free as possible21; in the practice of politics and administration that will not succeed. 22

---

20 ‘If it rains and you don’t want to get wet, you should use an umbrella.’ It makes a difference whether or not you regard the statement it rains true or not (‘well it only drizzles’). This example is used by Gibbart (2005), but does obviously not imply that ‘rain’ suddenly implies a prescription: the prescription is implied by the value ‘stay dry’.

21 Nevertheless, also in the sciences thing are not always clear. For instance in the introduction to Darwin’s Origin of Species points at ‘natural selection’ and ‘struggle for life’ as quickly seeming to imply normative associations with conscious processes (1998, p. XVI). That, according to Wallace is the source of many misinterpretations of Darwin’s evolution theory, even if Darwin’s terminology has become part of everyday vocabulary by now.

22 For instance Smith points at normative starting points in the so called social networks: in social networks software ideas on human interaction are embedded; implicit philosophical concepts that have become almost invisible to most people (A. Smith (2010) De generatie-face book doet zichzelf te kort: ze verdienen zoveel beter. NRC, Opinie en Debatt, 18 december 2010. P.3)
The proposed pantheon of public values is becoming a rather strange building as not only its contents is normative, but also the building block of the temple itself. What are then the building blocks of public values? The received opinion is that individual posses values and that public values are somehow reducible to these privately conceived values. Public values thus are either the sum or a cross-section of private values and have no (ontological) status as such. But is this a satisfactory assumption? An individual develops his/herself in relation and confrontation with fellow humans; the very notion (and experience) of individuality is a social construct. It is important to realize that what we regard private, i.e., the values we use to delineate a private sphere from a public sphere, can be regarded as a subset of public values. In other words, what are regarded legitimate private values is demarcated from the perspective of the public sphere, rather than the other way around: what I do in my own house, is my business. Well no, although a lot is allowed in the private sphere, but a lot isn’t. There can be good reasons to interfere in the private sphere because important (public) values are under thread. This approach is obviously in opposition with the dominant image of the relation between public and private values, but therefore not less enlightening.

Private or personal values do not precede the social, to the contrary, as already stated; the development of individuality presupposes a social context. Even in the case of ‘purely subjective’ preferences social conventions play a major role what will be accepted as a value and (thus) as a valid argument. Preferences such as coffee or thee, Lady Gaga or Mozart are specific to time and place and presuppose an encompassing social sphere. This is reflected in modern individuality and originality as it presents itself in advertisement; what I would call – after a well known Ikea bookcase – ‘Billy individuality.’

Also Bozeman (2007), who explicitly opposes an individualistic market oriented approach to public values, seems to provide public values with an individualistic basis by taking consensus as a core criterion for public values. Perhaps we should more radically take the priority of public values as starting point; a re-valuation of the social origin of values. Generally accepted core values such as freedom and justice are social constructs and can only be realized in a collective, social setting. If values are to be conceived as rational arguments they are – just as the language we have to use to argue in the first place – not primarily individual phenomena, but essentially social.

It may sound paradoxal at first, but the private sphere or private values, are framed from a public context: the social makes the individual possible and conceivable. The highest value or sumnum bonum for humans relies in the intertwinement of individual and social surrounding, i.e., fellow human beings. What Aristotle pointed at as the state or polis (Aristotle, 2000: Book VII, cc 1-3). Being human and an individual implies an orientation towards other human beings: Robinson Crusoe on his island wasn’t a free person, but simply lonely.

From an individualistic perspective the only legitimate public values are too easily reduced to problems arising from conflicting private values and interests, or even more limited, just market failure. This is what Bozeman opposes. He points out that next to market failure there is something called ‘public value failure’ (Bozeman, 2002). An example he provides is that from a market perspective business in human organs could be regarded
successful, however, it violates human rights (Bozeman, 2007, pp.134-8). Obviously, this argument implies that public values impede private values and consequent actions.

It also touched upon the problem of the legitimacy of government as being the representative of public values. The, by necessity regulating government is experienced all too quickly as an external power that intervenes in society, the market and the private sphere. This perception is almost unavoidable from an individualistic perspective on values. A rather perplexing example is a recent outcry of a citizen on an internet forum: “government should be concerned with my general interest.” The problem is that without abstract reflection, distancing oneself of the immediate own interest, it is difficult to comprehend the benefits of a parking ticket, the regulation against high fences in a suburb, and so on, when they prohibit my instant interests or preferences. But this ‘nasty intervening government’ is also the precondition to be able to articulate my interest to begin with. In fact, without government regulation there is no such thing as a free market where individuals can pursue their own interests and where freedom and protection (even against the market) is available. It all concerns the tradition problem of liberalism: to ensure the citizens freedom government has to limit and regulate citizen’s freedom. This is a fundamental problem already identified 200 years ago by Friedrich Hegel. From an individualistic perspective it is an irresolvable paradox, only by somehow including a social perspective on public values it can be resolved.

9.

By now it is obvious that our pantheon of public values is over-occupied. Are there perhaps a couple of ‘big’ values at the centre? Already 5000 years ago the kings in Mesopotamia declared themselves proudly as the protectors of justice, freedom, widows and orphans, and fighting corruption. It is an interesting issue to dwell upon the question to what extend the meaning of these values is specific to time and place. The problem is, as argued before, that ‘big values’ are also broad, vague and contested as to their meaning.

The pantheon contains an extraordinary collection. Some values are perhaps millennia old, others very recent: ranging from justice to internet access. The values are not to be regarded as solitary statues, standing side by side, it is more like a group statue where they are interconnected, sometimes having a twofaced Janus head, or perhaps having a couple of arms and legs too many, often appearing Siamese twins (or more!). Their meaning is interconnected and their precise meaning is highly dependent on the context or discourse in which they are called upon. Public values can therefore simultaneously rely on agreement and dissent. This is well reflected in the definition of one of the old big public values – corruption - as formulated by Michael Johnson: (T)he abuse, according to the legal or social standards

---

constituting a society’s system of public order, of a public role or resource for private benefit’ 
(Johnson quoted in Kerkhoff et al, 2010, p.448). This definition provides hardly any 
substantial characteristics of corruption, apart from that it is a negative value concerning 
public functions and resources: What is regarded abuse is time and place specific and relies on 
the social context of many other values regarding society and individuals. It fits the earlier 
remarks on integrity referring to some fields of values, it is not some static field, but can also 
be analyzed historically as a developing discourse over time.

As normativity is not limited to values, but also ‘colors the facts’, it is all the more important 
to regard public administration as the setting where facts and values are utterly intertwined. 
Public administration is concerned with identifying the relevant facts for assessing what is 
right, wrong, good or bad in society. It implies that facts are constructed and evaluated in the 
light of public values and (thus) the general interest.

As public administration has to be regarded legitimate by all or most citizens, these 
citizens should be able to identify with the public values in use as in line with (most of) their 
own ideas. It is therefore necessary to be open to both public and private values as these are 
values constitutive for the identity of individuals and groups. Nevertheless, it is probably 
asking too much to expect most people can acknowledge their own values as being at stake in 
state or public administrative actions. It is up to public functionaries (politicians, 
administrators, civil servants) to enable the identification and exposure of public values for 
and in society, and thus help provide the necessary legitimacy for public interventions in 
society and in the (publicly conceived) private sphere. It is to this purpose that facts have to 
be assessed in the perspective of (relevant) public values. How we construct public values and 
public administration is a fascinating and important subject that requires constant attention, in 
particular to guard against the fiction of ‘fact based administration’.24

Politicians, especially those with executive responsibilities, and civil servants have to aim for 
the general interest: the former from a broad political, ideological perspective, the latter in 
their role as public functionaries. Neither can take their own or group interests as point of 
reference without endangering the legitimacy of public administration. Richard Holloway 
(1999) – a former bishop of Edinburgh – stresses that political and administrative leader 
should be prepared to disregard their own values to make governance possible in present-day

24 In the study of public administration there are roughly three Lines of research that explicitly deal with public 
values. First, there is administrative ethics where the focus is on issues concerning public integrity (and 
corruption). In more recent years this discourse has broadened form more ‘classic’ philosophical and ethical 
reflection to include empirical research on moral values in public administration.

The second is ‘public value management’. The inspiration for this line of research is Mark Moore’s 
conception of public managers as creators of public values: “Public managers create public value. The problem 
 is that they cannot know for sure what that is” (1995: 57). It can be appreciated as a correction on the dominant 
focus on business like values in (the by now old) New Public Management. Sometimes this approach is 
presented as a new paradigm (Stoker, 2006). However, it hardly seems to be a ‘Next Phase of Public 
Management’ (Alford & Hughes, 2008), but rather appears in more recent studies as a fresh icing over 
management techniques (see for instance Cole & Parston, 2006).

Finally there is, what I would call, the Public Value Perspective. This approach takes as its starting 
point the intrinsic normative nature of public administration, and comprises a variety of theoretical and empirical 
approaches. The authors are critical toward the dominant approach in the study of public administration.
society. It implies that the public values transcend private interests in the public sphere and in particular for public functionaries. This is a big demand, but hardly new looking at Marcus Aurelius’ reflections, and perfectly in line with the ancient tradition of an oath of office.

References

Fischer, F. (19xx)


