
A MODEST PROPOSAL* ON “*THE MEANING OF LIFE*”

(With Apologies to Monty Python)

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Abstract

This article posits that Public Administration facilitates “The Meaning of Life” (with apologies to Monty Python). The first section locates personal “meaning” in individual empowerment and concludes that this empowerment is best achieved through a democratic system of collective action. The second section asserts the definitional boundaries of Public Administration necessarily must be drawn to include the democratic political system, which controls decision making and shapes implementation. Public administration, as the field that addresses the implementation of democratic collective action, therefore facilitates the Meaning of Life!

Introduction and Summary

While the pretentious reference to *The Meaning of Life* was written with a smile, the conceptual logic is presented seriously. Any Meaning of Life is, of necessity, individually defined (Frankl, 1984). Universal answers to metaphysical questions are stymied by the biologically individual nature of human beings. Collective human concepts must be constructed through a process of aggregating individual expressions. Whether humanity’s collective meaning or purpose is achieved, therefore, is an aggregation of individual expressions. The more individual concepts of purpose are achieved, the more society may be understood to have achieved human purpose.

Public Administration struggles with a similar and interpenetrating definitional debate. Public Management attempts to address the achievement of collective intent, yet collective intentions

and actions are not stable, but constantly evolve. Public Administration concerns the achievement of collective intent, yet collective intent is an aggregation of these continually changing individual intentions. Public administration is about achieving aggregated individual expressions of will and purpose. The extent to which more individual expressions are more fully expressed by the collective polity, is the extent that public administration is successful. Successful public administration, therefore, is about the achievement of the Meaning of Life.

This title is borrowed from Jonathan Swift's satirical essay "A Modest Proposal" written in 1729.

The Meaning of Life

The "Meaning of Life," whether in serious philosophical treatises or as humorous Monty Python cinema, is at the core of the human condition. The central questions of human existence are: Why are we here? What is our purpose? What are we supposed to do? A biological perspective (or Monty Python) might claim that human purpose is to propagate. A species' success lies in its ability to reproduce. In that area human beings are apparently quite successful. But humans have always sought a more transcendent purpose than mere reproduction. The problem is there is no universal agreement on such a purpose, but it is the very multiplicity of opinions that may guide us to an answer that lies in process rather than outcome (Frankl, 1984).

Human beings are biologically discrete creatures, and the very concept of "collective purpose" must be articulated individually (even as I am doing now). No group mind articulates our decisions, though collective interaction may result in some agreed upon group actions. Only discrete individuals attempt to communicate their perceptions of the world to each other. These individual perceptions may, in a postmodern sense, be the result of accumulated interactions of the individual with their environment, but those interactions are experienced and interpreted individually. To the best of our knowledge, mental activity is individual. Even Jung's concept of the collective unconscious (Jung, 1968) must still be articulated by individual human beings through individual faculties of communication.

Despite the individuality of our expressions, we realize that, as social creatures, we must work together to accomplish most of our desired individual ends, and we realize that working together requires collective decisions. But, the very concept of "collective" decisions is a bit of an oxymoron because of our biological limitations. Groups of people are not biologically wired to make communal expressions. They may express consent or agreement, but the expression of agreement is individual and subject to individual understanding and perception.

We seek a universal answer to the metaphysical question of life's meaning, and are stymied by the biologically individual nature of our communication equipment. What a dilemma! How can we collectively identify a *Meaning of Life* when our physical abilities and mental understandings are individual?

Because expressions and understandings are inescapably individual, the *Meaning of Life* for human beings is circumscribed by the ability of individuals to make effective personal decisions about their own lives. Each person articulates their own meaning, and this individual-based meaning arises from individual perceptions and understandings, which are not imposed. Meaning is individual, and so the meaning of life, at least in part, must be the ability to pursue one's own conception of that purpose.

The achievement of collective meaning is dependent upon the ability of individuals to express and pursue their individual understandings. I have an individual understanding of the meaning and purpose of my life (however vague that understanding). The more I am able to conceive of, and pursue, my personal understanding of meaning, the greater is my belief that I am achieving purpose and meaning. The more people who feel they can achieve "purpose" (regardless of how differently they define it) the greater the achievement of collective purpose. Because of our biological limitations, the whole is, indeed, the sum of the parts. Agreement by people on definition of purpose may facilitate its achievement, but such agreement is not necessary for individuals to feel they have achieved meaning. Individuals feel fulfilled individually. If many understand purpose similarly, that may facilitate a collective pursuit, but it is the total number of individuals that feel fulfilled that matters, not the number that agree.

Collective will or purpose is, in some way, constructed from individual expressions. Whether individual or collective will should have a higher priority in public policy is a misunderstanding of the human condition. Collective will is, of biological necessity, the aggregation of individual wills. Collective will cannot be arrived at except through a social process of aggregating individual wills. The measure of achieved purpose for a society is the extent to which individual desires (how many and how much) are achievable within different systems of collective action.

Impact of the Collective

Classical economics theorizes that the self-interested behavior of individuals will result in the greater good of all. What such individual-based economic thinking sometimes ignores is the systems or institutions that limit or control the ability of individuals to make effective personal decisions. Educational, religious, business and political institutions, as well as other individuals, all act to expand or limit individual choice. Institutions shape and control what is acceptable and possible within a society (Brinton, 1998).

Education and resources improve individuals' ability to understand and achieve choices. The more we know and understand about how the world works, the more we are aware of the consequences of our choices, and the less likely we are to be fooled by illusions and false promises. The more information we have access to, along with the ability to sort and understand that information, the more likely we can make choices that lead to our desires. Education, tools and information improve individual ability to conceive and make self-actualizing decisions, while access to these resources is often controlled by societal institutions.

Because the conception of meaning is individual, it is the ability to pursue that conception, to make effective personal choices, that bounds the achievement of the *Meaning of Life*. The capacity to make personal choices is a function both of individual freedom and of personal growth and development. By growth and development, I mean the expansion of understanding and empowerment. Education and empowerment help us achieve what we intend to achieve. Through growth of understanding, we become more aware of the choices available to us. Development of empowerment increases our capacity to

implement those choices. To the extent we increase our understanding of the world, and have the freedom to act on that understanding, we increase our ability to make meaningful personal choices. That ability to make meaningful personal choices is at the core of the *Meaning of Life*.

The normative perspective that frames this paper is that the purpose of existence for human beings is achieved through personal development, and personal development depends on individual choice or empowerment. Personal development or growth is reduced when others make our decisions. Individual self-empowerment necessarily underlies the purpose of human existence. Without the ability to make individual choices, the concept of human development is simply one person's or group's imposition of will upon others. The sum of individuals' ability to control their lives is the measure of a society's ability to achieve purpose and meaning.

A central difficulty with this personal conception of meaning is that we live in socially interactive societies, and individual actions in the human environment affect others. Individual decisions almost always affect other humans in a synergistic dynamic. One person's decisions influence the ability of others to make their choices. Therefore, individual empowerment is integrally dependent upon others' actions. One person's individual empowerment is part and parcel of the collective involvement of all the groups that involve and affect that person.

If, through application of power, one person or group imposes their will on others, the ability of others to achieve effective personal meaning is reduced, and thus aggregate human fulfillment is decreased. A public policy that maximizes human meaning and purpose will facilitate a collective decision making process most broadly empowering individuals to make personal choices. A public policy that maximizes human meaning and purpose undertakes collective decision-making that maximizes the efficacy of individual freedom, growth and development in a Pareto optimal manner, which minimizes the limiting impact of public policy on personal freedom of action.

Public Administration and Big Questions

If personal meaning is achieved through human development, and that development is shaped by collective decision making, it is to the field of collective decision making that we must turn. The field of Public Administration studies collective decision making and implementation systems. However, the field seems perpetually ensnared in self-definitional debates. The pursuit of the *Meaning of Life* requires sorting through that debate on the study of collective action.

Public Administration scholars continue to struggle to define their field. What do public managers do? What are they about? Despite the unending flow of articles and books addressing these questions, the divergent answers provide ample evidence that the field has yet to reach consensus.

Most introductory public administration textbooks open with definitions of the field. The following is a sample of those definitions.

Definitions of Public Administration and/or Management

- Henry (1999) "government and its relationship with the society it governs."
- Lane (1999) "the study of the activities and impact of government bureaucracies."
- Garvey (1997) "the calling of all those men and women who hold appointive and not elective jobs."
- Starling (1998) "the process by which resources are marshaled and then used to cope with the problems facing a public community."
- Milakovich (2001) "all processes, organizations, and individuals associated with carrying out laws and other rules adopted or issued by legislatures, executives and courts."
- Rosenbloom (1998) "the use of managerial, political and legal theories and processes to fulfill legislative, executive and judicial governmental mandates for the provision of regulatory and service functions for the society as a whole or for some segments of it."

Some display their definitions in the titles of their books:

- Rainey (1997) *Understanding and Managing Public Organizations*
- King and Stivers (1998) *Government is US*

Rosenbloom (1998) calls this plethora of definitions "mind-paralyzing," however; there is one issue that runs through all the definitions- the inclusion or exclusion of the political system. This central definitional divide reflects the politics vs. administration dichotomy epitomized by Wilson's 1887 essay. Despite continual protestations that the distinction is illusory, the theme fundamentally shapes all the definitions. The denials are sincere because nearly everyone accepts that politics is central to public administration. Yet, how and where one addresses politics delineates disciplinary boundaries. We can see the divide more clearly in the definitional debates concerning *public administration* and *public management*.

This debate seems to have arrived at an understanding that public management (using Lane's definition) is "the study of the activities and impact of government bureaucracies." Public management seems to explicitly draw its disciplinary boundaries around the universe of government organizations. What is outside those boundaries (i.e. politics- or more particularly the political system) influences and interacts with, but does not define the field (Garvey, 1997).

Big Questions and the Politics Administration Dichotomy

Debate about definitions continues, primarily because of disagreement on whether the field includes the broader collective decision making system. This debate has been epitomized in recent years by the "Big Question" debate initiated by Behn (1995). While most agree that politics and administration are inseparable, the public management/public administration debate belies that agreement.

Behn's "Big Questions" article (1995) illuminates this perspective. His "big" questions include:

1. Micromanagement: How can public managers break the micromanagement cycle?
2. Motivation: How can public managers motivate employees to work energetically and intelligently towards achieving public purposes?
3. Measurement: How can public managers measure the achievements of their agencies in ways that help to increase those achievements?

These questions are framed from the perspective of the agency, and draw a boundary around the discipline that circumscribes organizational borders. The very fact that Behn conceives of something called "micromanagement" denotes his understanding that those who micromanage (legislators) are outside the designated system. The problem as outlined by Behn, is that the partisan politician - who is outside the system- will not leave the objective neutral manager to do his or her job. Disciplinary boundaries are drawn around the agglomeration of government agencies. Behn calls for more discretion to those who carry out policy. Again, note that the phrase "more discretion to those who carry out policy" envisions a reality where public managers are the only ones to "carry out policy." Attempts by those outside the specified managerial system (legislators) to engage in managerial functions (e.g. staffing and budgeting) are, by definition, a functional "problem." While Behn acknowledges the integral importance and impact of politics, his description and rationale are not far from Wilson's original call for separation. His concept of micromanagement by legislators is only possible where these functions are separate and distinct.

Public Management scholars also stress "outcome" as the defining issue of the field, not process. Public Management is about efficiently and effectively accomplishing agency goals. This focus artificially separates outcomes from process, ignoring the reality of iterative, recursive interaction between the two in a democratic political system. It ignores the role of agencies in policy formulation. It envisions legislatures as setting policy goals at a single time in a single space. Goals are set within the legislative chambers; the goal making process ends with the passage of legislation and is completely divorced from the function of implementation. The very conception of "agency" conjures up that division (i.e. agents of the public). Our articulation of "separation of powers" between executive and legislative (as opposed to overlapping or integrated) reinforces the illusion (nowhere in the Constitution are found the actual words "separation" or "division" or

their derivatives).

The issue of motivation, similarly, articulates a perceived problem of employees not doing what they are "supposed" to do. By framing the "problem" in this way Behn creates a further division between top public managers and subordinate civil servants. In contrast to the voluminous literature on the concept of street level bureaucrats (e.g. Lipsky, 1980) and implementation (e.g., Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973) Behn portrays a world where "public management" is carried out solely by upper level civil servants. For Behn, public management "happens" in that space between political appointees and line employees. His "Big" questions reside in a world where the problem is that legislators limit upper management's power from above and employees limit it from below.

The last Big issue, measurement, emphasizes the importance of ends over means. Outcomes are the goal of government, as opposed to process. Results are the key measure of government success rather than decisionmaking process. Behn (1995) subordinates the process orientation of the U.S. Constitution to an emphasis on measuring outcomes.

Identifying these three questions as "Big" questions asserts a claim that they are central to the nature of the discipline. "Yes, of course politics can't be separated from administration, but micromanagement by legislators is a big problem. Yes, of course front line civil servants are integral to the policy process, but motivation is a big problem." The nature of this discourse is contradictory.

Public Management scholars ignore (or bemoan) the evolutionary nature of collective decision making. Implementation is normally framed as a linear process with stable and defined goals, able to be measured. The passage of a law is conceived as a stable, unchanging prescription of public policy. In reality, regulations, interpretations, funding, judicial decisions and executive orders, agency and street level bureaucrat actions constantly shape and change policy and its implementation. This democratic reality is usually acknowledged, but often portrayed as a "problem," (often of "micromanagement.")

In his 1996 response to Behn, John Kirlin criticized Behn's limited focus on public bureaucracies, stating that, "The big questions of public administration in a democracy must be rooted in achieving a democratic polity." King and Stivers (1998) in *Government is US* also draw the larger circle around the boundaries of public administration. Their key question is how can citizens achieve a democratic polity?

Note the key difference in the two approaches. Behn considers politics an outside influence on the measure of outcome achievement, while Kirlin and King and Stivers address a political system encompassing administration. If we re-examine the politics administration dichotomy we see this is the key distinction. Is politics –and by politics I mean the entire political process – an element of, or an influence on public administration? Is public administration about managing bureaucratic agencies, or is it about a system of collective decisionmaking?

The key question is not whether we should normatively separate the two, but whether *such separation is* conceptually possible. The dynamic nature of public policy makes the attempt to examine administration separately from politics frustrating and fruitless. Public Management cannot be separated from the broader political process of collective decision making. The interpenetration of public process and public action renders them indivisible.

Public Administration and the *Meaning of Life*

The field of Public Administration seeks to understand how societies make and implement collective decisions. The study of democratic public administration is the study of non-coercive, participatory collective action. Therefore, the big question for Public Administration is how to effectively make and implement democratic collective decisions.

The ultimate challenge and goal of the Public Administration system is to increase the abilities of individuals to make effective personal choices. Increasing the ability for personal choice is achieved through personal development and individual empowerment. Increasing individuals' understanding, abilities and freedom facilitates their effective choices.

Public Administration addresses our collective efforts to advance individual empowerment. It is the exploration of how to decide upon and carry out collective action to facilitate the fullest human development possible. It is the study of the collective action process, as distinguished from the study of how to achieve specific tasks. The *Meaning of Life*, because of its individual expression, is also achieved through personal development and empowerment. Public Administration, therefore, is the discipline that seeks to facilitate the *Meaning of Life*.

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Biographical Sketch

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