It’s the Theory, Stupid:
Re-Conceptualizing Public Policy as “That Which is Best at Any Given Time”

by

Dr. Hans J. Hacker*
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Abstract
The Liberal Discourse: Universal and Particularistic Conceptions of Identity

Despite how they are regarded by ideologues battling over policy and practice, post-modern philosophers have contributed to public dialogue on principles of liberalism. Primarily, this contribution has come in the form of clarifying the core concern around which most political policy debates swirl these days—discourse. Debates between those who might be called essentialists and anti-essentialists concern a diversity of topics from war and deficit-spending to public service provision and disaster-relief, from consumerism to culture and art and the goals of education. These debates have at their core the often unstated conflict over ontology - the veracity of truth-claims, the basis for knowledge and the limits of language. In the modern age, these ontological debates take on a moral significance because of the importance assigned to modern conceptions of being, in particular identity politics and its cousin in the private sphere, authenticity.

Thus, at the heart of the discursive theory of human experience lie the concepts of authenticity and identity, which establish the basis for determining the veracity of truth-claims and the appropriate use and limitation of language. Authenticity and identity are defined as moral (and modern) imperatives that however human beings are treated, the society in which they live must be structured to recognize and nurture fully human forms of expression apart from any undue outside coercion. Essentialists argue that authentic identity can only be achieved when a society identifies a common set of goals and established ways of living. Within Western culture, these common goals and established usages have taken on the status of axioms—external standards that embody rational, logical and natural states of living not simply for Westerners, but for all human societies. These axioms claim legitimacy through neutrality (not particularity) in that they can be universally and applied to all humans in their pursuit of authentic living – they have currency for humans in pursuit of the good life.

Anti-essentialists rebel against essentialist claims to universality. They argue that in requiring conformity to a standard of living that may be untrue to humans in most societies, essentialisms claims to universality as the path to authenticity are self-defeating. For the anti-essentialist, authentic discourse is in essence monological – a discourse within to find the authentic form particular to oneself. In the absence of external limitations, that discourse is true, correct or authentic when it is “true” to the individual. What is true to the individual is said to be relative to individual interests, goals, wants or desires. On the other hand, the discourse described by essentialists is based on external, supposedly neutral standards of what is best for humans. But, this is precisely what anti-essentialists challenge as a falsehood. To the anti-essentialist, essentialist discourse is no dialogue at all because one is not allowed to question the assumption that the identified mode of living is truly universal. In challenging the hegemonic essentialist assumption of universal good, anti-essentialists suggest that any truth-claims beyond the determination of what is a good on an individual level (and those things which are minimally necessary to hold a society together so that individuals may pursue their individual-level goals) are coercive, manipulative and illiberal.
The conflict between universal liberalism and particularistic liberalism has drawn various disciplines into its orb. These range from those part of the social sciences to the biological and chemical sciences. In political science, questions that serve as the basis for research as part of that discipline’s contribution to public debate (from abortion and gay rights to democratic institutional structure, access to institutions and public service provision) depend on a subtext of individuality and authenticity. The debate has particular salience in public administration, a discipline in search of an identity.¹ McSwite identifies discourse as a concern in public administration theory, and characterizes efforts to draw public administration into the debate over social theory that has spread from continental philosophical thought into disciplines as diverse as education theory, theater arts, hard sciences and political theory.² The distinction between theory and practice in public administration has focused efforts of public administration theorists on building bridges between those who advocate an applied emphasis to the exclusion of theoretical questions, and those who argue that the job of the discipline is to elucidate those things that are commonly done, and explain them with as great a degree of certainty as incomplete information will allow. This explanation is accomplished through a dialogue among those actors influenced or affected by administrative and bureaucratic developments. As McSwite notes “what we should expect from the competent use of theory is a way to approach administrative situations that achieves something like what people mean by the term "principled action."

By principled I do not mean that the action taken should be dictated by an abstraction. Rather, it needs to be an action for which the actor can provide an explicit analytical account, one that functions to "structure" the perspective of the actor rather than being "structured by" the perspective (the role position, personal attitude, or stakes) of the actor.

In this paper, I characterize the debate among essentialists and anti-essentialist. I begin with an explanation of the two liberalisms, exploring the ontological nature of the conflict more fully. Next, I examine the importance of this conflict for the discipline of public administration. Finally, I argue that both essentialist and anti-essentialist theories are misguided efforts to justify axiomatic thinking. Both theories identify the same goal (creating a social context supporting individual realization of authentic identity), and assign a crucial moral significance to that goal. These programs differ in how they define what role society plays in achieving it. Regardless of the role society plays, both theories fail in that they demand unflinching acceptance of those vehicles (universalism in one case, particularism in the other) through which the goal may be achieved. In both cases, the acceptance of these preconditions has taken on an authoritarian character. Thus, while these two liberalisms diverge significantly in what counts as good policy supporting individual pursuit of authentic identity, they enable a corrosive influence on public dialogue about achieving that very goal, a dialogue or account that is central to the goal

of authenticity. As public dialogue is central to the concept of authenticity, and these two theories pervert that dialogue, the two theories must be rejected on these grounds as perpetuating inauthenticity.

Finally, I attempt to outline the rudiments of a solution. Rather than substituting axioms or principles for others, American pragmatism discredits the enterprise of identifying axioms or principles at all. Pragmatism supplies the protocol for engaging in dialogue on matters of public policy. In rejecting axiomatic thinking, it avoids the pitfalls of authoritarianism into which any ideology will fall. Its ontology (if that word can even be applied) encompasses the ideas that beliefs are important (though not universally true) and context dependent (though not relative); that they must be justified (and, not simply at the individual level) or else abandoned; and that the test for what makes an idea good or bad is not whether it comports with some statement of principle, but whether the idea is useful in a particular context.

**A Tale of Two Liberalisms**

Traditional liberal theory is founded on the notion that a liberal society identifies and puts into practice that which is universally good for mankind. This good is largely defined as two mutually reinforcing components - a basket of universally applicable rights and a limited government that promotes opportunities to exercise those rights free from the interference of others. While various rationale have been used at various points in history to justify the preeminence of this supposedly universal basket of individual rights, generally liberal societies are ones that identify rights held commonly by all, adopt policies that protect individual rights by imposing penalties when those rights are violated, and provide legal institutional mechanisms for individuals to participate in crafting social and political policies, i.e., to control their own political destinies to some degree.

In liberal societies, enjoying these rights also has a crucial moral dimension which the state plays a role in fulfilling. In essence, Dworkin argues that rights are not simply good for the state, but crucially important for individuals to develop into authentic human beings. Thus, in the modern liberal state, there is general trend toward attaching an ethic to individual rights leading to authentic individuality, an ethic that claims such individuality is a good in itself apart from any benefit individuals may provide to the society through pursuit of individual aims. Isaiah Berlin, for example, argues that the heart of liberty is the absence of coercion by others. Consequently, the liberal state's interest in protecting liberty involves insuring that citizens do not coerce each other without compelling justification. Furthermore, any interference by government in the lives of individuals beyond that necessary to ensure cooperation for mutual benefit and self-interest is anathema. Coercion occurring outside that necessary to maintain the basic functions of the state and ordered interaction with others is viewed as immorally oppressive because it deprives individuals of the opportunity to become “self,” warping

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3 Natural Law, Natural Rights, Divine endorsement, broad agreement/concensus
5 Charles M. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*
the identity of those who experience the unwarranted coercion. Charles Taylor notes that achieving this sense of self is the hallmark of life in the modern Western world, where “to be free in the modern sense is to be self-responsible, to rely on your own judgment, to find your purpose in yourself.” 7 The truly free individual in the liberal state is (or so it goes) one who seeks for rationality within himself and defines his identity not by what is around him, but through exploration of what is within.

For the individual, the benefits of liberty in the liberal state can be organized and understood in terms of the general trend toward universal equality in the distribution of resources that lend themselves to the pursuit of individual identity described above. A quick list of categories might include social/civil equality (freedom of thought, conscience and association), economic equality (property, transactional and contractual rights and obligations), and political equality (universal suffrage, jury service, transparent government and open qualification to stand for office). These are said to support and encourage individual experience of liberty with as little compulsion as possible.

On the other hand, liberalism is sustained by limiting governmental power to interfere in private lives, and this demands some justification in communal terms – why is it necessarily good that government limit its own power to interfere in private decisions on how life should be lived? Here, the primary justification for emphasizing individual rights at the expense of governmental power is the benefit that accrues to society when individuals committed to the enterprise of realizing their full and (perhaps) unique potential, contribute something to society economically, socially, culturally, or politically. Thus, in the exercise of their individual rights, liberal society demands that citizens conform to social expectations of what is a good person within the definition of liberalism itself – cooperative, self-interested and acquisitive individuals that serve the state through the development of their own narrow interests. This pressure to conform comes in various types (political, social and economic) and from various sources (significant others, community, majority and from government and the legal system). Thus, within the program of individualism at the heart of liberalism is a significant counter-current flowing against the very thing liberalism seeks to avoid – coercion to conform at the expense of the individual liberty the liberal state exists to promote.

**Liberalism & Public Administration**

Mainstream public administration theory supports this basic conception of human good, and seeks to legitimize policies that pursue it in practice. In a democracy, “the first obligation of the appointive official or bureaucrat is to be explicit about the value premises and implications of public decisions.” 8 And in our particular sort of democracy, public officials must sooner or later justify both the design and the implementation of their practices in moral terms. In pursuit of such as justification, mainstream theorists of Public Administration are predominately motivated by a belief that bureaucratic organizations’ contribution to society is the bringing of order to an otherwise chaotic,

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8 Yates (1981)
confusing and crushingly complex reality.\(^9\) In this regard they tend to believe that “the purely bureaucratic form of administration is...superior to any other form in precision, in stability, in the stringency of its discipline, and in its reliability”\(^10\) and, more importantly, they believe that bureaucratic institutional forms should exist to ensure not only that citizens can make choices consistent with their self-interest by guaranteeing certain procedures (such as voting) and individual rights,\(^11\) but that they can secure our deepest traditions including civic representation,\(^12\) defense of the constitution,\(^13\) social responsibility,\(^14\) and equality of treatment.\(^15\)

However, in recent years, this conception of public administration as a discipline has come under attack from alternative models claiming that the supposedly universal mainstream theories are in fact not universal at all. As Thaddeus Metz notes, these alternative models spring from the same source as the mainstream and liberal public administration theory (i.e., Kantian liberalism) and are based on the idea that “the state should not attempt to realize a conception of the good because doing so would treat citizens disrespectfully.”\(^16\) The problem, so it goes, is not simply that mainstream theory mistakenly endorses the idea of universalism while pursuing nobodies’ idea of good in particular. Rather, it is that it purposefully masquerades as universal while covertly endorsing highly particularized, biased conceptions of what is good and how to achieve that good. This is the basis for Rawls’ critique of traditional liberalism, as well as that of other scholars.

Through its dominance, mainstream public administration theory contributes to the broader liberal program that inappropriately forces persons into modes of living that are non-neutral and highly biased toward particular viewpoints. These viewpoints are based on some combination of masculine, legal, capitalist, practical,\(^17\) liberal and rational ideals justified through highly formalized and self-legitimating processes and institutions.\(^18\) All result in a paternalistic, authoritarian approach to governance that rationalizes the use of power to control the population and advance this narrow conception of public good. For example, the problem comes into sharp focus when viewing the application of supposedly universalistic principles in the context of nationalism and globalism. Liberal definitions of distributive justice are predicated on a commitment to equality, couched in

\(^9\) (Marini, 1971; Rohr, 1986; Spicer and Terry, 1993; Terry, 1995; Thompson, 1975)
\(^10\) (Roth and Wittich, 1978 p.223).
\(^11\) (see Kamensky 1996),
\(^12\) Finer, 1941
\(^13\) Rohr, 1986
\(^14\) Morstein Marx, 1957
\(^15\) Thompson, 1975
\(^17\) O.C. McSwite, The Language of Public Administration: Bureaucracy, Modernity and Post-Modernity, a review of Charles F. Fox and Hugh T. Miller, (University of Alabama Press, 1995) in *Public Administration Review*, March-April 1997 v57 n2 p174. The author argues that public administration as a discipline emphasizes the practical over the abstract in a way that is anti-intellectual, giving primacy to the “real” world as given, unquestioned, and authoritatively “professional.”
the moral terms. “The simply fact of humanity,” says Metz, “is sufficient to motivate a demand for equal concern and respect.” However, distributive justice plays out in the reality of a national conception of justice, tacitly legitimizing deprivation of “others” outside the nation. Thus, the structure of legal and national institutions influence our understanding of the liberal distributive principle, and may do so in violation of the principle itself.19 Furthermore, one can make the argument that the revision of American federalism hastening a move toward centralization of power and a material conception of the good (so dominant in Public Administration practice) has produced similar results within the United States. Peterson has argued that the price of consolidating economic power in the National government has led to regional and state inequalities in the distribution of resources – precisely that which such consolidation sought to avoid.20

It is the existence of these kinds of paradoxes for which mainstream public administration theories cannot account, and which has constituted the anti-essentialist theory program over the last decade. As McSwite has noted

We in public administration must learn to embrace paradox, to let contradiction stand, and to stop insisting on the singular truths that one-dimensional rationalism promises but never quite provides.

Alternative models replace these particularistic theories with a set of ideals of their own. Generally, a broad range of anti-essentialist theories argue that government should remain neutral to the definition of a general public good and ensure that, however they behave, citizens treat each other fairly. The reasoning behind this assumption is that particularistic theories will enlarge the possibility for social conflict by limiting the permissible range of options from which citizens select modes of living. In tacitly encouraging inappropriate citizen dependence and coercion, government elevates the potential for socially harmful behavior from those who do not agree with the truth claims of the dominant social model. Furthermore, anti-essentialist theories undermine the role of reason in the articulation of preferred policy choices through the assumption that all value choices are equally valid. Thus, any attempt to define and justify a set of choices as better than any other is impossible, even off limits.

In this paper, I argue that while alternative models may be right about the limits of mainstream public administration theory as it is now constructed, they inappropriately degrade policy choices by assuming that no rational process exists for defining what is “the best” public policy. Alternative models conceive of policies as simply collections of a vast number of selfishly individualistic preferences expressed as demands on government for the fulfillment of personal wants and desires. Where these preferences came from (or, how their efficacy is to be evaluated) anti-essentialist theories cannot tell. Ultimately, anti-essentialist theories run the risk of tacitly accepting current states of social and economic inequality and abuse as natural. This approach to individual and collective (societal) choices has been described as narcissistic, ultimately leading to the instrumental treatment of individuals (a conception of individuals as means for achieving

ends, rather than ends in themselves). The implications for public policy and governmental legitimacy are extraordinary, as recent events such as governmental and bureaucratic responses to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita have demonstrated.

The failure of public policy to match the expectations of citizens was clearly seen in the public reaction to the government management of the Hurricane Katrina disaster, and further served to alienate citizens from the governmental bureaucratic structure designed to serve them. To commentators and the public alike, the failure of governmental policies was viewed as a devaluation of certain populations and a lack of proper recognition of general human worth. What was needed to accomplish the task at hand was that feature of public administration most lacking – a grounding on the inherent dignity and worth of citizens, and a recognition of human worth through the avoidance of racism and classism.

Second, this paper proposes a set of alternative conceptions of public administration that balance the benefit of strong collective aims with the avoidance of authoritarian public policy. To achieve this balance, government must abandon the mainstream theory assumption of universality (a universal good which is so for all time), and reject the anti-essentialist notion that defining anything as “good” is merely an effort to force conformity. In place of both these assumptions, I argue for a pragmatic conception of “good” as “that which is best at any given time.” Under this conception, responsive government is one that prefers what works. First, a responsive government seeks to determine not simply what citizens want from its policies, but why those things are desired. Thus, it determines the process used by its citizens for assigning meaning, and encourages a reexamination of that process. Second, a responsive government undergoes constant revision. It seeks out ideal policies that have broad applicability in solving problems as they exist. Rather than searching for policies based on universal principles or axiomatic assumptions, it searches for those policies that work given the particular state in which a society finds itself, and those that further collective goals as currently defined. It reserves the power to revise and adapt policy when the need arises, i.e., when social states change dramatically, or when policy designed to achieve an established social aim simply does not work. In short, a pragmatic government that seeks to comprehend the attitudes and values of its citizens before making policy is the only way to create meaningful and effective policy which does not treat citizens as means to a narrow and selfish end.

Finally, this paper addresses the paradox of