As Good as It Gets? On the Meaning of Public Value in the Study of Policy and Management

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Abstract

Public values are being promoted as a core concept in the study of public administration, in particular, in discourses surrounding Moore's public value management and Bozeman's public value failure. This article outlines the approaches to the concept of values and public values. Particular attention is paid to the founding distinction between facts and values, which proves to be less clear than usually assumed. After discussing a range of possible characteristics of public values, an encompassing definition is attempted, which consequently has to accommodate opposing characteristics. It is concluded that the concept of public value is a fuzzy concept, and that is probably "as good as it gets."

Introduction

Public values are a hot topic in the study of public administration. A core question is, however, what does "public value" mean? This article aims to pinpoint the concept and its uses in contemporary discourse as to better understand its "uses and abuses": Does the concept provide our field with a clear object of study? Attention to values is not new in the study of public administration. As I scan my old textbooks, I find Waldo's (1984) famous "The administrative state," which is concerned with values throughout, even though Waldo himself does not frequently use the term. Then there is Robbins' (1980) "The administrative process" (p. 26), which points explicitly at a value system that guides all administration. And Simon's (1976) "Administrative behavior" takes the fact–value distinction as a crucial notion. What is new is the rise of public values as "extraordinarily popular" (Rhodes & Wanna, 2007, p. 406). A wide range of studies take public values as their central object of study, and the number of articles discussing public values has risen substantially in the past decade (Van der Wal, Nabatchi, & De Graaf, 2015). Authors are dealing with ethical issues in organizations (Kernaghan, 2003), competing values (Selden, Brewer, & Brudney, 1999), comparing values in public administration and business (Van der Wal, Huberts, Van den Heuvel, & Kolthoff, 2006), they focus on performance and leadership (Bao, Wang, Larsen, & Morgan, 2013), and so on.

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Bold claims and great expectations are sometimes voiced, regarding public value as an important theoretical and practical "guiding concept." For example, public value is regarded as resolving democratic deficits in modern public administration (Benington & Moore, 2011b, p. 261; cf. Benington, 2009, p. 246); it is increasingly used in administrative practice (Beck-Jørgensen, 2006, p. 364); it is presented as "a hard-edged tool for decision-making" (quoted in Alford & O'Flynn, 2009, p. 181), and "a rigorous way of defining, measuring and improving performance" (Cole & Parston, 2006, p. xiii). Due to the focus on public values, it has been stated that we are even entering a "new era in public management" (Talbot, 2009, p. 167; cf. Stoker, 2006).

Apart from a more general trend to refer to public values, there are two more or less independent schools or discourses that can be distinguished in the study of public administration that take public value as their core object of study.[1] First, there is the discourse on public value management (PVM), initiated by Mark Moore's 1995 book *Creating Public Value* (2005). This has resulted in a research agenda that has been developed and adapted by many authors (cf. Alford & Hyghes, 2008; Benington, 2009; Cole & Parston, 2006; Meynhardt, 2009; Meynhardt & Metelmann, 2009; Stoker, 2006; Talbot, 2008, 2009), all of whom regard PVM as the next step after New Public Management, moving away from a state-versus-market perspective (cf. Benington & Moore, 2011a, p. 9; O'Flynn, 2007, p. 358; Spana, 2009).

The other discourse is more policy oriented and has recently come to center around Bozeman's (2007) *Public Values and Public Interest*; it also roots in the 1990s, if not in Waldo's earlier work. Here, the concept of public values is in opposition to dominant "economic" approaches in the analysis of public policies (Bozeman, 2007, p. 18). There is a more heterogeneous group of authors associated with this discourse, besides those specifically developing Bozeman's public value failure (PVF) model (Feeney, 2008; Feeney & Bozeman, 2007; Fisher, Slade, Anderson, & Bozeman, 2010; Meyer, 2011; Moulton, 2009; Moulton & Bozeman, 2008).

Despite all the optimism, however, after 20 years the concept of public value has not yet gained a consensus, being used by most authors as an unproblematic, everyday concept that can be used fruitfully in theory and practice. More recent attention to its meaning has resulted in little more than an outline of the elusiveness of a clear definition (O'Flynn, 2007, p. 358; cf. Meynhardt, 2009, p. 204). So, an important question is how do authors define their core concept? And, as stated at the beginning, does public value provide the clear focus it is supposed to for studying public administration?

The following argument concerns not what specific values can be regarded public values, but what the concept of public values amounts to. To start with the next section deals with the possible scope of the public values that are denoted by the concept. Next, the underlying concept of values and its definitions and peculiarities will be discussed. In particular, attention will be paid to the often overlooked fact/value distinction. Turning to public values, the very foundation or ontology of public values as either individual or social will be considered. This is of specific importance as the individual approach is dominant, but not necessarily always adequate. Finally, the definition of the concept of public values is discussed. The main conclusion will be that the lack of clarity of the concept and the confusing use of the term are problematic. Despite bold claims, the concept of public values seems to perform more of a heuristic function, than providing a well-defined focus for theory or praxis. Nevertheless, an encompassing definition will be attempted.

A Pantheon of Public Values

To begin with, it seems relevant to identify what actually are regarded public values. Phrased differently, what is the collection or class of phenomena the concept of public values denotes? Over the centuries, there has been a great deal of debate on the possible core values with which government and public administration should be concerned. The values espoused vary

from classical values such as justice, prudence, freedom, democracy, health, to drinking water, education, a loyal bureaucracy, and even children's playgrounds and internet access. It is well beyond the scope of this article to provide even a summary review of all proposed public values (cf. Rutgers, 2008).

How the vast multitude of possible meanings relates to one another is a concern. Attempts to order and categorize have proved problematic. Most of the classifications put forward lack clear criteria, which can be illustrated by looking at one of the most elaborate texts on values by Van Wart (1998). He employs two different classifications in his book. The first consists of the five categories figuring the ethical code of the American Society of Public Administration (the ASPA Code of Ethics). The number five is posed as adequate and avoiding too much overlap (Van Wart, 1998, p. 5). In the second part of the book, Van Wart provides a specific theory as a basis for classification: "a cultural framework perspective," which he adapts from Edgar Schein's work on organization culture[2] (Van Wart, 1998, p. 166; cf. Brocklehurst, 1998, p. 452). However, Schein distinguished three levels (cf. Schein, 1987, pp. 15-18, 1999, pp. 15-26), whereas Van Wart refers to four. Most importantly, Van Wart provides no clear way to identify values and ascribe them to specific levels, and he explicitly notes that consistency is not to be expected.

A second example is provided by Torben Beck-Jørgensen and Barry Bozeman (2006). Their frequently cited article explores "the boundaries and meanings of public value." They identify seven "constellations" of public values. As in the case of Van Wart, these categories have some overlap, that is, the same values can occur in more than one constellation. The constellations are based on "relationships" among values, for which purpose they identify "nodal values" that are central to a constellation and have many relations with other values.[3] Examples of such nodal values are "human dignity" and "integrity." They are not, however, necessarily the most important values, if only because their very meaning is a matter of debate. Building on Beck-Jørgensen and Bozeman, I would suggest that it is rather their 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 fit 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. This does not resolve the lack of (relatively) clear criteria for constructing a cluster of related values, nor can it help avoid overlap; it remains a contingent cluster.

The foregoing indicates that public values as a generic concept refer to a very diverse set of concepts (i.e., values) irrespective of origin, use, relations, and thus meaning: It is not just a generic, relatively clear-cut concept such as "wood" or "human," but a "pantheon concept." The term pantheon serves here as a metaphor for the encompassing conceptualization of the contingent (empirical) collection of all possible concepts that are referred to as public values.[4] This metaphorical term can be helpful to grasp what it means to talk about public values as an unproblematic, yet vague concept. Our "pantheon of public values" captures that we can and do heap together values as public values, even if we are unsure about the mutual relations, hierarchy, and even if they can coexist. It denotes, for instance, the public values in Moore's (2005) book, the values of the Founding Fathers, as well as the public values of liberalism.

What Are Values?

Looking at the class of phenomena that is denoted by the concept of public values, we have established that this constitutes a very eclectic pantheon; but what then is the set of characteristics (the connotation) of the concept? According to classic definition theory, the characteristics of the concept should provide a "clear and distinct" means to identify what phenomena are included or not. We have seen two examples suggesting that this is not possible. Obviously, "public" is a core

characteristic to distinguish within the class of values, so we will have to identify what values are. "Value" is a tricky concept, and its definition is be the object of study in this section, followed by considering the distinction between values and facts in the next.

The most common approach to define "value" is by pointing at (more or less) synonymous concepts, such as preferences, desires, needs, and interests (cf. Mittelstrass, 1984, p. 622). Arguably, the most concise definition of value is provided by Perry: "A value is anything of interest to a human subject" (cited by Sills, 1968, p. 283; cf. Rescher, 1982, p. 4). Sills (1968) provides a slightly more specific definition, stating, "values to be conceptions of the desirable, influencing selective behavior" (p. 283; cf. Hodgkinson, 1978, p. 120). To pose values as concepts expressing "the desirable" distinguishes them from the undesired or rather the a-desired[5]; the implied common opposite is a concept denoting a fact (as discussed in the next section). Can we find a more clear definition? To begin with, let us turn to the discourse in the study of public administration.

It turns out that most authors in the PVM and PVF discourse do not provide a definition of values, nor public values (cf. Van der Wal et al., 2015), and only offer synonyms (cf. Alford & O'Flynn, 2009). Spano (2009), however, does present a specific definition: "Every thing has a value when somebody is willing to face a sacrifice to get it, because he/she believes that the potential benefits outnumber the sacrifices" (p. 330). Others do not follow his example, probably because the links to a "sacrifice" and "to get it" seem rather economic or utilitarian, and not to fit easily with ethical, esthetic, religious, and other non-economic values. Beck-Jørgensen (2006) uses Kluckhohn's definition that is also used widely outside public administration: "A value is a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action" (p. 366). He also points out the possibility of implicit and explicit values and of values being more substantial versus the more trivial wanting: "'the desirable' (e.g., a virtuous life) in contrast to 'desired' (e.g., a cold beer)" (Beck-Jørgensen, 2006, p. 367). Both Spano and Beck-Jørgensen, in common with several others, refer to the vast interdisciplinary literature on values that do not provide a more concrete definition of values. Limiting value to an economic perspective is generally rejected. For instance, Benington (2009, p. 237) points out the economic notions of exchange value, labor value, and use value, but stresses that, certainly in relation to the concept of public values, the concept needs to encompass ecological, political, social, and cultural dimensions of value.

The difficulty to provide a substantial definition of value is not surprising when considering the concept's history: Attempts to arrive at an encompassing and comprehensive value theory or axiology have remained fruitless ever since the mid-19th century when it gained popularity. Attempt to provide a definition of value resulted in enumerating synonyms and/or illustrations, just as nowadays. One of the later authors who attempted to construct a universal theory of values, William Stern (1924), makes the interesting observation that value is perhaps a base or fundamental concept that simply cannot be reduced to any other concept.[6] It should be noted that it is not self-evident that an everyday term, such as value, can be expected to express one concise concept to begin with. This seems to be a characteristic of some other concepts as well: the (in)famous "essentially contested concepts."[7] These are often important core concepts used to identify and delineate areas of social action and research: power, integrity, politics, and public administration. It behooves an author to make explicit how he or she intends to use such a concept, because its meaning is so vague, contextual, and/or ideological. However, Rhodes and Wanna (2007, p. 408) suggest that it is precisely the vagueness that makes the concept pliable for all kind of uses in public management. It seems like a "magic concept," as Pollitt and Hupe (2011), call it, that has "a broad scope, great flexibility, and positive 'spin'" (p. 642).

Nevertheless, the meaning of "value" is sometimes anything but fuzzy: For instance, when an expert in a television program such as "the Antiques Road Show" states, "This has only

sentimental, no real value." "Real value" is used to refer to money. It also indicates that value is not inherent to the phenomenon under consideration, but attributed to it in an evaluative judgment. Paraphrasing Stern (1927, p. 41): Value *is* not something, but something has value in the perception of an observer. This means that we give something—an idea, an object, a fantasy—a positive *or* negative meaning; we judge or evaluate it from some perspective. Something can thus have a monetary value, but also an emotional one, 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 (among others) beautiful, courageous, honest, or holy, or on the contrary as ugly, cowardly, deceitful, or devilish. It is, however, almost a universal custom to refer to values only as a positive concept, that is, as about the desired. This was the case in earlier examples and can be further illustrated by Hodgkinson (1978): "concepts of the desirable with motivating force" (p. 120). However, I would argue that a value can be any concept that expresses a positive or negative qualitative (or evaluative) statement and has a "motivating force," that is, it gives direction to people's thoughts and actions. It can be argued, for instance, that "integrity" and "corruption" are two terms denoting essentially the same value, be it in terms of a positive or a negative concept.[8] The existence of opposite pairs of values is ubiquitous: good and bad, freedom and bondage, honor and disgrace, brave and cowardly, and so on. The one value is to be attained, the other is to be prevented, but in both cases they are powerful concepts that are intended to give normative direction. This is not an opposition of valuable and invaluable or worthless, for "invaluable" suggests that it is simply without significance and/or normative force. A negative value is not just insignificant, but also gives direction as being reviled, despised, condemned, something to be actively avoided and rejected, not simply ignored. This is certainly not a new insight; indeed, it links back to Immanuel Kant's argument that the conception of negation (from physics) can be applied to social inquiry.[9] As it is usually easier to agree upon what people do not want, that is, value negatively, it may be a means to empirically arrive at consensus more easily than by only focusing on the positively desired.

It does however also enhance the reproach that values concern everything, and thus nothing. Is the characteristic of values as concepts that express "the (un)desirable" adequate? Should we in the study of public administration indeed regard my preference for cappuccino over black coffee an expression of a relevant value? Should we not at least distinguish values from personal preferences? This is what Beck-Jørgensen was concerned with when opposing "the desirable" to the "desired." There are attempts to arrive at some kind of distinction between the origins and grounding of values. Hodgkinson (1978), for instance, distinguishes three kinds of groundings of values, arguing that "thou shalt not kill" is an example of a metaphysically grounded value (p. 110). However, it seems equally possible to do so from a rational or an emotional perspective. It seems likely that values are underdetermined by possible groundings. Instead, we can look at the meaning of "valuing" as an activity in which we qualify something as funny, innovative, boring, uninteresting. To value or evaluate is always 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 implies a measure or norm in the light of which something is appraised. This norm has to be derived from the value at hand (such as "democratic"), but it can also be a norm 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 better, however, not to regard the evaluations in terms of personal preferences for personal benefit (see also "Identifying Public Value" section) as valuations or evaluations in the primarily relevant meaning in the social and political context. Without delving too deeply into the issue, preferences are of a "lesser status" than values (including personal values such as "my honor"). A strict distinction between preferences and values (or, the desirable or the Desirable) seems unlikely.

This brings us to a very different approach to try and define values; not in terms of characteristics of some value, but in terms of its functioning in human argumentation. This is central to the

philosopher Nicolas Rescher's (1982) approach: "*A value represents a slogan for the 'rationalization' of action*" (p. 9; italics in original).[10] Values function as arguments in rational debate concerning what to do or not to do, and are central to so-called "practical reasoning," that is, 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)

From this perspective (subjective) preferences provide weak arguments, (intersubjective) values, and certainly public values provide more forceful arguments.

Rescher starts by discussing the role of values in the rationalization of actions. Rationalization is often regarded as the provision of arguments after a decision or act (certainly in psychology it has this ad-post meaning). This cannot be the sole meaning for Rescher, as he states that values have a function in "practical reasoning," that is, the arguments used to arrive at a solution (i.e., not afterward) to resolve a practical, especially moral ("pragmatic") problem (cf. Honderich, 1995, p. 709).[11] We can thus also attribute to values more than "just" discursive meaning, that is, what has been referred to before as the motivating force of values for human thought and action.

Going from Kluckhohn to Rescher, we have identified some important characteristics of the concept of value. What has not been dealt with is the distinction between values and their obvious opposites, facts. At face value, this might provide a clear delineation of the meaning of value.

Facts and Values

An everyday means to characterize values is by simply opposing them to facts. It is surprising that the fact/value distinction does not figure in the debates, despite the fact that both the PVM and PVF discourse distance themselves from forerunners (NPM) or approaches (economic market failure theory) that are characterized by fairly strong orientations toward "facts and figures." What is more, opposition of meaning (dichotomy) is actually one of the most important and powerful semantic relations (Lyons, 1971, p. 461).

The possibility to debate what constitutes a fact 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—which are the concern of public administration—it is just as obvious that facts are by no means straightforward. Even if we agree on what are facts, it is not the facts as such that matter, but which ones are relevant or meaningful, that is, valuable: Appraisal is an essential part of public administration (Self, 1982, p. 192). This may range from weighing the visual impact of a new building on a skyline to evaluating the risks of a terrorist attack. The criteria for judging relevance and meaning in all such assessments are primarily public values: Is it legal, efficient, democratic, is it a public concern to begin with?

It should also be noted that even the most factual concepts bring more than just a descriptive meaning. For instance, "policy" has normative meanings distinguishing it from politics. This example also brings with it a cultural trait: We can talk meaningfully about policy and politics as distinct concepts in English, but that is not the case in many other languages (or in previous times; cf. Rutgers, 1996).

The discussion of facts and values (or description and prescription for that matter) can be aided by using the more all-encompassing epistemological notion of normativity. Railton (2000) regards this as the most important concept used by philosophers to refer to a number of crucial phenomena. Normativity transcends fact and value; it is not in opposition to descriptive or factual, and thus not limited to valuations, evaluations, and prescriptions. The notion that facts and values can be entirely separated is what Putnam (2002) calls a "thought-stopper" (p. 44). The

notion is misleadingly implying that all values are just irrational and subjective preferences, in contrast to facts, which have some objective status. The idea of distinguishing two separate "realms" is, for instance, used by Hodgkinson. Although Hodgkinson (1978) is keenly aware of "the world of overlapping value and fact" (p. 104), he also states that facts and values are substantially different: Facts are somehow "true" and objectively verifiable, while values are not true or false (p. 105). The plausibility of the fact–value bifurcation depends entirely upon the possibility to keep "facts" pure, that is, unaffected by a human observer. It has been well established that this is impossible, which has hardly been 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, pp. xiii-xiv); in other words, we select and give meaning to our perceptions. As Putnam (2002) states, "Values and normativity permeate *all* of experience" (p. 30). The recognition that all meaning is normative is influential among present-day philosophers.[12] 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: The distinction is only analytic (p. 308). This fits Rescher's interpretation of values as rational arguments.

The values on which we base our norms for descriptions as well as for evaluative purposes are socially determined.[13] They are shared to a high degree in a society or culture, even though there will be no clarity about their precise meaning and there is room for discussion of 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, but this is obviously trickier in the case of complex social and moral values. Those values have a cultural embedding and origin is hardly new. It reflects Ricoeur's (2004) notion that the appropriation of a value is not some isolated, solitary phenomenon, but is always 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. This is an insight that will have a bearing on the very foundation of public values.

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 (for instance, "deregulation," "specialization," "flexibility," to name but a few examples from reviews). This underlines the remark by Rothstein that the fact–value distinction is only analytical and can thus "evaporate" in social practice as making sense or providing guidance in establishing meaning. On the face of it, it is not clear whether the statement "this is a bureaucratic organization" is descriptive or evaluative, and in case it is the latter, whether it is positive or negative.

The intertwinement of fact and value is perhaps best known in relation to so-called "thick concepts" (Putnam, 2002, p. 35). Examples are "cruel" and "friendly." I would argue that most, if not all concepts in natural languages, can have both a descriptive and evaluative meaning, not just thick concepts. For instance, "Turn right after the ugly building" uses an evaluative term for descriptive purposes, just as "blond" can be used descriptive as well as evaluative. Many descriptive terms are associated with, or used as, evaluative terms. Thus, in the sciences an attempt is made to make descriptions as value free as possible[14]; in the practice of politics and administration that would seem to be even more impossible. We have to deal somehow with the very normativity of administrative reality.

The social nature of values and valuing brings us finally to an important founding question with regard to public values: Are public values some kind of sum of personal values, or do public values have a different kind of ontology?

The Ontology of Public Values

Arguably, the most elaborate and in-depth discussion of the concept of value in recent Public Administration is by Meynhardt (2009), who regards value as "one of those ambiguous container terms with enormous promise of insight but no widespread consensus" (p. 196). He refers to the philosopher Rescher (whose value theory will figure later on), as having shown that all attempts have failed to get a more precise "value terminology." Core problems in value theory are discussed by Meynhardt, such as the question whether values only have a subjective status, or perhaps also an objective meaning. In the end, he uses psychological theory concerning human, individuals' needs to find a foundation for his use of value. This brings us to an important conclusion of Meynhardt that suggests a firm foundation for understanding what value is: "the *basic idea that public value starts and ends within the individual*" (p. 215; *in original*). However, likely from a (social-) psychological approach, it does by no means make it self-evident that public value is properly understood and analyzed in terms of the values of individuals. Public value not only relates to a notion of the public as the object of the value in question but also as the origin or foundation, that is, that it derives its meaning not so much from an individual's values, but is intrinsically linked to a collective notion such as "the general interest" even though this brings in a host of new problems.[15] Also Meynhardt points at the necessity to look "beyond" the individual when he states that public value is as much "outside" the individual, that is, in between individual and group (or public). So what then is the origin or ontology of public values? Do they have an individualistic or personal origin, or a social or cultural basis.[16] This is of particular importance for, if the origins of public values are to be traced back to values held by individuals, that is, the actor level, it seems likely that public values can be established by somehow tracing and adding up these individual values, with a mechanism to resolve conflicts between them. If, however, public values have their origins at a system level, that is, in culture, the identifications of public values becomes a different matter: It will require politics and/or argumentation.

The ontology of public values is nothing less than the major question concerning the very ontology of the social sciences. In the ongoing discourse on public values, the dominant, implicit opinion is that individuals possess values and that public values are somehow reducible to these privately conceived values. As we have seen, Meynhardt states this for instance explicitly. Bozeman (2007), who opposes an individualistic economic approach to public values, nevertheless seems to provide public values with an individualistic basis insofar as consensus is a core criterion for public values (and consensus is regarded the result of individuals interacting). From an individualistic perspective, the only legitimate public values are reducible to individual's (private) values, or, even more limited, concern mere market failure. In particular, the latter may result in what Bozeman (2002, 2007) opposes as "PVF." An example is that, from a market perspective, a business trafficking in human organs could be regarded successful, even though it violates human rights (Bozeman, 2007, pp. 134-138). Obviously, this argument implies that public values impede private values and consequent actions. At the same time, public values seem nevertheless to transcend individuality at least in consensus, or in what Benington and Moore (2011b) refer to as "the social consciousness of interdependence" (p. 259). Moore (2013) also states that the public or the collective is his starting point, not private or individual values. He captures this in phrases, such as "the collective arbiter of value" (p. 58). This requires him to differentiate between individual, personal values, and values as a citizen, that is, as representing the collective "we." Here, the whole issue of what is a public value draws in the vast debate on what is democracy, public interest, and so on. If public value research cannot somehow delineate its core concept, it unavoidably draws in the whole set of problems of political philosophy and practice.[17]

Meynhardt (2009), although taking the individual as his starting point, draws the conclusion that value "expresses subjectivity and is bound to relationships" (pp. 199, 213). He even criticizes Moore and others for not delving into the roots of public values in human nature. This links

to Rescher, pointing out the inherent link between values and ideas about the good life: funda-mental beliefs about human nature and society. Insofar as we are dealing with public values, Meynhardt's grounding of public values in psychological theory seems to imply a reductionist perspective, and this does indeed seem to be the case when he equates basic values and basic needs. However, needs too are species and/or culture specific. There are more arguments to doubt the individualistic ontology of values. For instance, as also Meynhardt acknowledges, an indi-vidual develops himself or herself in relation and confrontation with fellow humans; in fact, the very notion of individuality is in the end a social construct. Also what we regard as private, that is, the values we use to delineate a private from a public sphere, can probably be best conceptual-ized as a subset of public values. In other words, what are regarded as legitimate private values is demarcated from the perspective of the public sphere, rather than the other way around. There can be good reasons to interfere in the private sphere because important (public) values are under threat. This implies that private, personal, or individual values do not precede the social; on the contrary, they presuppose or build upon a social context. Even in the case of "purely subjective" preferences, social conventions play a major role in what will be accepted as a value and (thus) as a valid argument. Preferences such as coffee or tea, Lady Gaga or Mozart are specific to time and place and presuppose an encompassing social sphere, and indicate that there is a limited range within which individuality can be expressed and experienced.

Oyserman (2001) makes an interesting distinction when discussing the nature of values that may indicate how to resolve the matter. He simply observes that values can be conceptualized at group and individual level: First, "At the individual level values are internalized social represen-tations or moral beliefs that people appeal to as the ultimate rationale for their actions" (p. 16151). This is where differences in personal preferences have a place and the use of values when explain-ing or legitimizing individual behavior in terms of someone's values. Second, values at group level refer to cultural ideals shared by members of a group: "Values are codes or general princi-ples guiding action, they are not the actions themselves nor are they specific checklists of what to do and when to do it" (Oyserman, 2001, p. 16151). It makes sense to locate public values at the group level. As a consequence, "citizen satisfaction" is a possible public value, but a person's individual satisfaction with some product or service is not, nor the simple sum of such percep-tions. The assessment whether or not "customer service" is met from a public perspective is a different matter. This brings in a host of well-known issues related to the way we can establish "the public interest" or the like. It will somehow involve a legitimate procedure to arrive at acceptable decisions. The concept of public values as such is hardly any help in resolving this, however, it shows that the interstices of private (value or preferences) and public (value or inter-est) are a prime consideration.

Identifying Public Value

This brings us finally to the concept of public value as the new core concept. Van der Wal et al. (2015) analyzed 397 publications on "public values"; only 87 provided a definition of public values, 27 of which provided their own definition: "each of these definitions is used less than ten times, suggesting again that the study of PVs is scattered and fragmented." As stated in the intro-duction, the concept of public values is hardly discussed and is regarded as a matter of common sense. Thus, Coats and Passmore (2008) simply put forward an analogy: "Public value is the analogue of the desire to maximize shareholder value in the private sector" (2008, p. 4). One may wonder whether this is really enlightening or results just as much in new blinkers. Others use vague entries and refer to related, yet different concepts, such as "public goods," "public inter-est," or "public benefit" (cf. Alford & O'Flynn, 2009, p. 175).

One of the few authors to expound on their concept of public values is Bozeman. He provides an elaborate definition, which is often cited:

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)

What is more, Bozeman opposes public values explicitly 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'" (2007, p. 12). This suggests that contrary to public values, the public interest is not a matter of consensus: "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). It seems a difficult distinction to work with, but Bozeman tries elegantly to 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 or as a shared vision on society as a whole is a matter of (specific) public values having become accepted as such; that is, some public values have more general enduring acceptance. In this respect, it is perhaps surprising that in an earlier work Bozeman actually refers to the lack of consensus that is so central in his definition: "Clearly the lack of consensus on public values tempers our ability to develop simple analytical tools" (Bozeman, 2002, p. 150).

I suggest we should stick to the notion of public values as being primarily about the (perceived) general or public interest, and thus not concerning someone's personal interest. Benington (2009, pp. 233-234; 2011, p. 42) distinguishes two aspects of public value: First, what the public values, and second, what adds value to the public sphere. However, "what the public values" is not automatically a public value, but it can be a generally shared private value. For instance, if everyone values having a television, a nice couch or kitchen, that doesn't make it a public value. The second aspect Benington mentions is therefore crucial. Showing that access to television important for children's education and social participation, and thus in the public interest can result in proposing that providing families with children access to a computer is a public value.[18] In other words, that someone values social justice, fair ages, oppose child labor, or (sticking to an earlier example) prefers cappuccino does not make personal values public values, but that they are when proposed or reasoned as being in the general interest, the common good, the summum bonum, or the like: "what the public values as public." Clearly, such a claim can and should be backed by other arguments and will gain impetus if shown that it is supported by other people as being linked to "the good of the commonwealth" (and not just in the interest of some specific group for itself). Public values understood as values regarding a collectives' "long-term survival and well-being" can include morally values, as well as be at odds with other more immediate (perhaps "short term") public values. However, whether or not there is some kind of (temporary or enduring) consensus concerns a different question and should perhaps best be left out of the definition of public values as such.

Of course, we have to reflect on the preconditions for public values. This concerns the very notion of public, the public sphere (Bozeman & Johnson, 2015; Moulton, 2009; Nabatchi, 2012), and the political mechanisms that create and change public values. "Democracy" is an example of an enduring, idealized public value how to arrive at establishing proposed public values as directive for collective action. A similar circularity applies to other "great" public values that are constitutive for the (prevalent) notion of the public sphere (cf. Kairyst, 2003 on the rule of law). Public values are values that concern the general interest, whatever that is: The two cannot really be defined independently, and some circularity seems unavoidable, for we are dealing with base concepts for understanding social reality.

Besides Bozeman, Meynhardt's (2009) is one of the few to provide a definition of public values: "Public value is what impacts on values about the 'public'" (p. 206), and arrives, inter alia, at a psychological theory of needs. Slightly different from Benington, he argues that public value

is perhaps something that affects values, that is, "values about the 'public'": "It is about the values held about the relationship between an individual and a social entity (constructs like groups, community, state, nation) that characterize the quality of this relationship" (Meynhardt, 2009, p. 206). This fits with broadly accepted public values such as justice, democracy, or rule of law. We can also add "relationships between groups," put differently, it concerns an image of humanity and of society, including the important distinction between public and private. Although Meynhardt rejects references to the "common good," it is unavoidable that this implies a notion of "the good life" or "the good society." As Rescher (1982) argues, any substantial concept of values is "a vision of the good life" and "a vision of how life ought to be lived" (p. 10). Public values are specific values that concern "the good society" or "the general interest," that is, the sustainability of society and the well-being of its members, irrespective of immediate personal preferences or interests.

Final Observations

At the beginning of this article, the question was raised of how the concept of public value is constructed as a core concept for studying public administration. There appears to be at least three different ways the term public value is used in contemporary discourses.

First, to refer to a specific value as being important in relation to "the public" (justice, democracy, freedom, health, and so on). Attention is on the meaning of these specific public values, while the meaning of the concept of public values is simply presupposed as unproblematic. Authors in both the PVM and PVF discourses are primarily concerned with the question of how to identify and achieve these public values.

Second, the term public value is used as a generic ("second order") concept to denote the totality of possible public values in the first sense. Few attempt a "clear and distinct" definition, but as a pantheon concept it is likely that there is no identifiable singular set of characteristics for all public values. A more universal or broader definition will probably demand what Wittgenstein (1976) referred to as a "family resemblance" (p. 66). Wittgenstein himself uses the concept of a "game" as an example (p. 67): Some are fun, some are cruel, some are individual and others team sports, and so on; there is no singular set of characteristics all games share, just as family members differ.[19] What is more, definitions of public value somehow end up in circularity by having to refer to "the common good," "the Good Life," and vice versa as constituting the ultimate public value(s). A similar issue of circularities applies also to the equally presupposed assumption of a distinction between public and private.

Third, contrary to the previous two, the term public values is used not to denote a concept or object of study, but an approach to study public administration. An instance, being Benington and Moore's (2011b) remark: "The future of public value is bright" (p. 274).[20] To avoid confusion, it is preferable to refrain from using public value in this sense, and use a specific name, such as PVM. Worse still from the perspective of avoiding confusion is to make a difference between singular and plural names as to refer to PVM as "public value" and PVF as "public values" (PVF; cf. Nabatchi, 2012, p. 699).

The concept of values remains either underdeveloped or proves to involve a fairly complex (interdisciplinary) conceptualization, as Meynhardt, for instance, shows. It seems unlikely that a single conceptualization of public values can resolve existing vagueness and ambiguity, and thus provide a clearer focus for theory and, in particular, praxis. This is reflected in observations such as " . . . the concept of public value(s) is not as unitary in meaning and usage as many people would like it to be" (Van der Wal & Van Hout, 2009, p. 227). In fact, the focus on public values results in the introduction of almost all conceivable disciplinary and philosophical issues the field has encountered over the decades. There remains an important way in which public values may indeed be a helpful concept; not as a well-defined theoretical concept to guide action, but as a

regulative idea (Meynhardt, 2009, p. 204) to help identify important issues. This is similar to John Rohr's use of the concept of regime values as a guide for action for bureaucrats: It is not a theoretically precise concept, but primarily a pedagogical instrument (Rohr, 1989, p. 68; cf. Overeem, 2015). In a similar way, public value is used as a heuristic. Thus, Bozeman's PVF framework is a heuristic device to identify important consequences that may possibly be overlooked, and Moore's public value score card is a heuristic tool for public managers: As Talbot (2008) suggests, the "public value score card" functions as a kind of "operational definition of public value" for Moore (p. 3).

As a heuristic, public value can assist to put administrative phenomena in a different light, although there is limited clarity regarding the nature of public values themselves it helps avoid focusing on facts as easy, undisputable starting points. However, at a conceptual level, we seem to be confronted with the same sentiment as March (1989) indicated when discussing the concept of power as "a residual category for explanation" (p. 148), going on to state: "On the whole, power is a disappointing concept" (p. 149). Just as power is a generally used concept, we could do with more proof that public value has value as a core concept. Also similar is that power somehow implies a causal relation ("the ability to influence other people's behavior"), but it is equally difficult to establish how (public) values actually influence behavior.

To conclude, let me suggest a tentative, perhaps slightly absurd, encompassing definition of public values taking into account the previous observations: Public values are enduring beliefs in the organization of and activities in a society that are regarded as crucial or desirable—positively or negatively—for the existence, functioning, and sustainability of that society—instant or distant—the well-being of its members—directly or indirectly, and present and/or future—in reference to an—implicit or explicit—encompassing normative ideal of human society—the Good Society, the Common Wealth, the General Interest—that give meaning, direction, and legitimation to collective action as they function as arguments in the formulation, legitimation, and evaluation of such—proposed or executed—collective actions. They may or may not be posed or embraced by either an individual, collectives, and/or the entire political community, thus create consensus, or be the object of debate and twist.

The previous definition tries to capture most of the aspects discussed previously (and actually a bit more). Depending on the normative (descriptive and prescriptive) intentions, characteristics may be excluded or included (such as Bozeman's specification in terms of "rights benefits and prerogatives") or, I would suggest a specific sub-group of public values concerning the nature and behavior of those, the public functionaries—political or administrative, and amateur or professional—who have to ensure that public values are identified, legitimized, attained, and maintained.[21] The final line of the definition indicates that it is possible for an individual to regard something a public value, and that at the other extreme, consent of all members of a polity before a value is considered "public."

Undoubtedly more characteristics can or should be added. As indicated, circularity is difficult to avoid, and no public value can include all characteristics simultaneously. Although a lot is included, also contrasting characteristics, the preconditions for public value, such as the social context, the distinction(s) between what is regarded public (or private), or the political regime are left out.

On one hand, public value is a crucial concept as public administration is focused on their creation, legitimation, execution, and formulation. On the other hand, the danger is that it is a kind of neo-axiology: A way to broad and fuzzy concept that somehow has to include all administrative phenomena. The stance that public value is a valuable core concept is not entirely convincing. It is difficult to pinpoint its meaning and make it truly a clear concept for thought and action. Even a clear distinction between facts and values proves tricky; but it stressed that public administration can never pretend to limit itself to facts. Looking at the many attempts over the decades, may be a fuzzy concept of public value is "as good as it gets."

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Notes

1. Of course, depending on one's aim other "schools" may be pointed out. Thus, Bozeman and Johnson (2015) distinguish three (public policy, management, and normative) approaches and in Rutgers (2012) I added public ethics as a separate discourse, but the public service motivation literature may perhaps also be stipulated as focusing on public values.
2. Schein is one of the most influential authors on organizational culture (cf. Brocklehurst, 1998, p. 452).
3. "Values with large numbers of related values we label nodal values. They appear to occupy a central position in a network of values . . . we prefer the term nodal because there is less implication that the value is necessarily more important than others" (Beck-Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2006, pp. 370-371).
4. The pantheon was a temple in Rome devoted to all gods or divinities in the Roman Empire: It is the original "hall of fame." Being devoted to 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.
5. The opposite is not necessarily the opposite, that is, the unwanted, by simply that which is not (understood as) an object of desire. Thus, a fact as such is neutral in relation to its desirability: It can be valued positively or negatively. See also later on: Values can be positive and negative.
6. "Eine Definition des Wertbegriffes ist nicht möglich; denn es gibt keinen anderen elementaren Begriff, auf den er zurückgeführt werden könnte" (Stern, 1927, p. 41). A similar difficulty concerns, for instance, defining the concept of concepts, yet we cannot do without it (cf. Peterson, 1984).
7. This expression is usually attributed to Connolly (1984).
8. In this example, both values actually rely on the same metaphor of the body as being either whole and healthy, or diseased and mutilated. Oppositeness of meaning is a most important semantic relation. Ferdinand de Saussure argued that in any language values or meanings are established by means of either opposition (dichotomy) or similarity (synonymy; cf. Lyons, 1971, p. 461).
9. A negative magnitude is not just a negation, but a magnitude on its own with a different orientation; that is, it is negative insofar as it neutralizes an opposite magnitude (Kant, 1763/1981, p. 786).
10. This is in line with the notion of normativity that is discussed later on: For instance, Raz (2000, p. 34) argues that all normativity is closely linked with reason and rationality. Dancy also 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, p. viii).
11. I would argue that rational argumentation and rationalization afterward are closely related (cf.–Rutgers & Schreurs, 2003).
12. The thesis of the normativity of meaning originates from the work of Kripke (1982). Of course, there are also counterarguments, both against the normativity of meaning, as against its implications for naturalism (cf. Hattiangadi, 2006; Papineau & Tanney, 1999).
13. 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).

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

15. At the same time, this brings again back in a lot of difficulties, if not simply because "the general interest" is almost synonymous to public and equally vague and confusing (Alford & O'Flynn, 2009, p. 175; cf. Bozeman, 2002, p. 148; King, Chilton, & Roberts, 2010).

16. The issue discussed here does not concern values as either subjective or objective; the prime aim is to establish the ontological status of public values versus private or personal values.

17. As can be argued is indeed happening in Moore's (2013) book.

18. In fact, this is not a made-up argument, the Netherlands cable companies have obligation to provide a cheap basic set of channels to all families, the choice of channels being controlled by a citizen panel.

19. Wittgenstein (1965) actually rejects "our craving for generality" (p. 18). This implies that there is no singular set of characteristics (connotation) available. There may even be opposing qualities, and as a consequence these characteristics will not simultaneously fit a specific use of the concept.

20. This replicates the well-known confusion resulting from using the same term "public administration" to refer to both the object of study and the actual study itself, as opposed to, for instance, politics, economy, and society (or the social) for political science, economics, and sociology, respectively.

21. To include special attention to public functionaries as the people who have been granted specific public authority to intervene in others people's lives, concerns an important public value for the study of public administration. It acknowledges that public functionaries have a special responsibility to help identify, formulate, and even contribute to arriving at shared or at least legitimate public values and how these affect specific, actual goals, and ends (i.e., actions) for their realization.

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