In Defense of Politics in Public Administration
A Value Pluralist Perspective

Michael W. Spicer

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA PRESS
Tuscaloosa
The purpose of this book is to offer a defense for the idea and practice of politics in public administration. Admittedly, defending politics nowadays is a challenging task in light of the fact that politics and politicians are not especially popular and, in fact, candidates for elected office of a variety of ideological stripes often make great play of their desire to take politics out of government and to make government run more like a business or, alternatively, like a family or even a church. However, in looking at the failed states all around the world, this sort of antipathy towards politics strikes me as a rather silly, if not outright dangerous, sentiment. Certainly, like all human activities, politics reflects many of the vices that we see in much of human behavior: those of greed, avarice, pride, vanity, envy, lust, and so forth. Nonetheless, notwithstanding the vices of politics, it is important to remember that politics is also productive of certain virtues. Perhaps among the most important of these is that it can help us to keep the peace by limiting the use of violence in dealing with our differences. Whatever its vices, politics as a practice, for example, has enabled us in the United States, despite a wrenching depression and enduring racial strife, to avoid a second civil war for nearly a century and a half. Moreover, as events in Darfur, the Congo, and elsewhere make abundantly clear, keeping the peace through politics is not an achievement to be sneezed at. The horrific events of human suffering and violence associated with these conflicts should serve to remind us that politics is a precious, but also a very fragile, human achievement and it is not one lightly to be put aside. Politics provides us with a means of settling, at least for a time, the inevitable conflicts of interests and values or conceptions of the good that seem to arise among us without having constantly to take up arms against each
Introduction

Politics is, as Bernard Crick once wrote, “a way of ruling divided societies without undue violence” ([1962] 1993, 33). Moreover, as I argue in this book, politics is far more than just this. It is also a way of forcing us to face up to the conflicts among moral claims or values that are an integral part not just of our personal moral experience, but also of the practice of government and public administration. Furthermore, politics is a means of limiting the sometimes seductive and even admittedly occasionally helpful, but more often personally and socially destructive, consequences of single-minded obsession and zealotry.

Anti-Politics

Notwithstanding what I hope to demonstrate are these virtues of politics, it must be admitted that public administration, since its inception as a self-conscious field of study, has often expressed what can best be termed an “anti-political” attitude. Woodrow Wilson, for example, famously expressed such an attitude when he complained about the fact that “the people... have a score of differing opinions” and “can agree upon nothing simple” so that “advance must be made through compromise, by a compounding of differences, by a trimming of plans and a suppression of too straightforward principles” (1887, 207). In Wilson’s view, politics was an obstacle to progress and reform because “the many, the people who are sovereign have no single ear which one can approach” and they “are selfish, ignorant, timid, stubborn, or foolish with the selfishnesses, the ignorances, the stubbornesses, the timidities, or the follies of several thousand persons” (1887, 208). More recently, Richard Nathan has complained about “the hyper-pluralism of American government” and has argued that we should consider ways of “toning down” this hyper-pluralism so that “hard problems can be addressed more easily and more expeditiously” and so that we might “get policy closure on high-salience issues and bring competence to bear in the implementation of these new policies once adopted” (1995, 215). Expressing an aversion to the political conflict characteristic of modern government, Nathan believes that we should do more to “insulate decisions from political heat and bring expertise to bear in doing so” (214). Nathan is by no means alone here in his aversion to political conflict. Kenneth Meier, perhaps one of our leading contemporary public management scholars, has opined that our “electoral branches of government have failed as deliberative institutions” and that their “policy failures... are legion” because they are unable to “resolve goal conflict with informed public policy” (1997, 196). As Meier sees it, what public administration and governance need today is “more bureaucracy and less democracy” (196). Robert Behn, another leading writer in public management, has urged public managers to “exercise leadership” and to “take initiative to correct” what he sees as “the current
failures of our system of governance” (1998, 221)—failures that include, in his view, the fact that “elected chief executives rarely give clear directions to their agency managers,” the tendency of legislatures to “give directions that are ambiguous and contradictory—and often unrealistic” (214), and the “political failure of our system of governance created by the power of factions” (218).

Lest it be thought that this somewhat disdainful attitude towards the normal practice of politics has been somehow confined to the pages of specialized academic journals, it is worth noting that such an attitude has also been evident in more popular writings on public management. In discussing possible reforms in the budgetary process in the 1990s, the National Performance Review (NPR) report, for example, asserted that the budget should reflect what it termed “the thoughtful planning of our public leaders” and should not simply be “the product of struggles among competing interests” (Gore 1993, 15). “Unfortunately,” from the NPR’s perspective, “the most deliberate planning is often subordinated to politics” (15). David Osborne and Peter Plastrik sound a similarly critical note when they complain about how “steering” or “choosing and evaluating strategies to achieve fundamental goals” is “far easier in a rational, nonpoliticalized environment than in the typical political environment one finds,” because “in most political environments, elected officials are far more interested in achieving their short-term political goals . . . than in increasing the government’s capacity to choose long-term goals and strategies to achieve them” (1997, 107). Indeed, these authors would seem to display an almost complete lack of any respect at all for the political process when they endorse the idea that government reformers should “stand up to the interests that block change” by pursuing a “damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead” approach to political and administrative reform (329). More recently, writing with Peter Hutchinson, Osborne urges reformers to reject “compromise policies” because “they do not produce the right outcome for the public at the end of the day” (2004, 334). In their view, it is time for reformers “to move beyond the outworn ideologies of left and right” and to seek “radical change rooted in common sense” (xiii–xiv).

The antipathy of our field to politics is exemplified best, perhaps, in the idea of the politics-administration dichotomy. Wilson, who is often credited with first advancing this idea, wanted public administration to be “removed from the hurry and strife of politics” (1887, 209). According to Wilson, “administration lies outside the proper sphere of politics” and “administrative questions are not political questions” (210). Civil service reform, for him, was “clearing the moral atmosphere of official life by establishing the sanctity of public office as a public trust” and was “but a moral preparation for what [was] to follow” (210). Seeking to further insulate administration from politics, Wilson sought the development of what he saw as an apolitical science of administration—one that, drawing on
insights from European administrative theorists and the practices of European absolutist monarchies, would "straighten the paths of government,... make its business less unbusinesslike,... strengthen and purify its organization, and... crown its duties with dutifulness" (201).

Wilson's idea of a politics-administration dichotomy, despite being frequently discredited by critics such as Dwight Waldo ([1948] 1984) and Norton Long (1949), remains influential within our field. Waldo himself refers here to the "perdurability" of the politics-administration dichotomy (1983, 219) and, according to David Rosenbloom, the dichotomy "continues to define a good deal of administrative thought" (1993, 503). Contemporary popular writers on public management, for example, call for a separation of "policy decisions (steering) from service delivery (rowing)" (Osborne and Gaebler 1993, 35), a distinction that clearly parallels the dichotomy. Also, scholars such as James Svara and Patrick Overeem continue to debate the meaning, relevance, and implications of the dichotomy in the most recent pages of our scholarly journals (Svara 2006, 2008; Overeem 2006, 2008). As Gerald Caiden put the matter a quarter century ago, "the prospect of separating things political from things administrative remains enticing" (1984, 51). If the politics-administration dichotomy is a myth, as critics have often charged, then it is a myth that, at least for some, "still remains an ideal that may yet be attained," a myth that "will linger on as long as there remains a strong anti-politics flavor in American society and scholars and public professionals still strive for objectivity in public administration" and, also, "as long as there are people who would like to run society, any society, scientifically and objectively" (Caiden 1984, 71).

Common to a great deal of our literature is the sentiment, therefore, that politics is, at best, a necessary intrusion into governance and administration and one that compromises its efficiency and effectiveness. There is the intimation in a lot of our literature that while, given our democratic ideals, we would of course never wish to do away entirely with the conflict, compromise, and uncertainty of politics, it would perhaps be better if we could have somewhat less of it and somewhat more of enlightened statesmanship, expert administration, or some combination of these. Camilla Stivers is correct, in my view, in recognizing here our "tendency to view politics as a contaminant of rational, rigorous practice" (2008, 56). Politics bashing is an age-old activity, one that dates back at least to the writings of Plato. We must recognize that politics and politicians have always had a somewhat shabby reputation. As Crick reminds us, there are "many who think that politics is muddled, contradictory, self-defeatingly recurrent, unprogressive, unpatriotic, inefficient, mere compromise, or even a sham or conspiracy" (1993, 16). Indeed, he notes how, for many people, "it is the first test of a new acquaintance's sensibility that he despises politics, politicians, and po-
political speculation (even occasionally among those who ‘profess’ the subject). . . . They object to its most characteristic features—compromise, uncertainty, conflict” (165).

Nonetheless, there is reason to worry, in my view, when those who would seek to advise and educate our public policy-makers and administrators so often express what is clearly an anti-political attitude. There is a danger here that the public administrators we help train might internalize such an attitude and actually come to see themselves as somehow superior to, or above, politics. Crick recognizes this danger when he warns of “those who think that administration can always be clearly separated from politics, and that if this is done, there is really very little, if anything, that politicians can do that administrators cannot do better.” This is “the view of the servant who would not merely be equal, but who would be master, or of the administrator who feels constantly frustrated in his work by the interventions of politicians” (1993, 107).

Science in Place of Politics

A major reason why a defense of politics in administration would seem especially important right now is that our discipline is showing a renewed interest in a more scientific approach to governance and public management (Meier 1997; Gill and Meier 2000; Lynn, Heinrich, and Hill 2000; Hill and Lynn 2004). As with antipathy towards politics, this enthusiasm for a science of governance is not an entirely new sentiment in public administration. As noted above, Wilson himself, early on in our field, sought the development of a science of administration that would, as he put it, discover “what government can properly and successfully do” (1887, 197). Indeed, because of the compromise, uncertainty, and conflict so often associated with politics throughout history, there have always been those who have been tempted by the possibility of some more rational, more scientific way of resolving the differences that arise among us. Among the best known of these was, perhaps, Henri de Saint-Simon, a French utopian positivist philosopher of the early nineteenth century, whose ideas influenced Karl Marx among others. Following the French Revolution and more than a decade of European war, Saint-Simon looked to positivist science to preserve peace and social order. He saw such science as the means of “stopping [the] terrible scourge of general war, and of reorganizing the European community” (1964, 27). The problem, in Saint-Simon’s view, was that, because “the method of the sciences of observation has not been introduced into political questions, every man has imported his point of view, method of reasoning and judging, and hence there is not yet any precision in the answers, or universality in the results” (40). He believed that “divisions of [political] opinion arise from the fact that each man has
too narrow a view” and that, “for clear thinking men, there is only one method of reasoning, only one way of seeing things, if they are looking at them from the same point of view” (67). Positivist science would remove the sources of war and political conflict in human affairs.

To avert revolution and anarchy in the future, Saint-Simon advanced a collectivist plan of radical political and social reform rooted in his concept of positivist science. He argued that “the main energies of the community . . . should be directed to the improvement of our moral and physical welfare” (1964, 76). In order to accomplish this end, Saint-Simon advocated giving “priority in State expenditure to ensuring work for all fit men, to secure their physical existence; spreading throughout the proletarian class a knowledge of positive science; ensuring for this class forms of recreation and interests which will develop their intelligence” (77). These efforts were to be administered by an elite group consisting of those “most fitted to manage the affairs of the nation, . . . [its] scientists, artists and industrialists” whose work “contributes most to national prosperity” (78). Saint-Simon saw the development of scientific knowledge as forming the basis for a non-deist “New Christianity,” one that would “link together the scientists, artists, and industrialists, . . . make them the managing directors of the human race, as well as of the particular interests of each individual people,” and “put the arts, experimental sciences and industry in the front rank of sacred studies” (105).

For Saint-Simon, social conflict and strife, both between nations and within nations, appeared as solely a technical problem, one that could be resolved on the basis of principles of positivist science and with the assistance of relevant expertise. To modern ears, Saint-Simon’s ideas may seem wildly utopian, a mere philosopher’s fantasy, at least at first glance. Nonetheless, this idea that social conflict might somehow be resolved by the application of science has remained very seductive. In fact, it is an idea that has pervaded an awful lot of our public administration literature and arguably forms the very foundation of our field. It appeared most visibly in the beginnings of our field in the scientific management movement of the early twentieth century, a movement that was inspired by the writings of Frederick Taylor. Taylor saw his principles of scientific management as not just a means of greatly enhancing economic prosperity, but also as a tool for resolving the great social conflicts of his time, most notably the industrial conflicts that were prevalent between workers and businesses of the early twentieth century. In fact, as Waldo observes in his classic review of early public administration writings, “it was the need for ‘solidarity’ that stimulated Taylor’s first researches” (1984, 52). According to Waldo, Taylor disliked “the constant warfare” that he experienced as a foreman in supervising workers and “he wanted to take the matter of a fair day’s work out of the realm of dispute”
and “make the facts sovereign” (52). As Taylor himself wrote, scientific management was to render economic life not only “far more prosperous” but also “far happier, and more free from discord and dissension” ([1911] 1998, 11). He believed that the application of his scientific management principles would promote “more than all other causes, the close, intimate cooperation, the constant personal contact” between workers and businesses and, as a result, would “tend to diminish friction and discontent” (75). As Taylor saw it, “it is difficult for two people whose interests are the same, and who work side by side in accomplishing the same object, all day long, to keep up a quarrel” (75). Scientific management would reduce industrial conflict because it would arrange “mutual relations” between workers and businesses in such a way that “their interests become identical” (1). It was about “harmony, not discord,” about “cooperation, not individualism” (74).

Taylor’s ideas of scientific management are often closely associated with industry time management studies. However, Taylor saw his principles of scientific management as extending well beyond the shop floor of industry. In his view, these principles could be applied “with equal force to all social activities” including “the management of our homes; the management of our farms; the management of the business of our tradesmen, large and small; of our churches, our philanthropic institutions, our universities, and our governmental departments” (1998, iv). Taylor’s followers were often even more effusive than he in regard to the potential contributions that scientific management might make to governance and society. Harlow Person, for example, believed that the philosophy, principles, and techniques of scientific management could be applied to the “conservation problems of entire nations, and perhaps of an entire world” (1972, xvi). Scientific management, for Taylor’s disciples, was more than just a theory of management, as it is so often described nowadays in management textbooks. It was a moral, political, and social movement. Notwithstanding some acknowledgements that there might be realms of behavior where scientific management was inapplicable, there was within the scientific management movement, nonetheless, “a disposition to extend the discipline to the whole realm of political or economic behavior” (Waldo 1984, 55). In fact, some of Taylor’s followers envisioned “the entire world run on the principles of scientific management: universal peace between nations, and between social classes, the ultimate in efficiency and in material satisfactions, liberty and equality in their proper portions, general education and enlightenment” (Waldo 1984, 52). As with Saint-Simon, there was also among Taylor and his followers, then, this same utopian inclination to substitute the principles of a science for politics in resolving social conflict. As Robert Kanigel writes in his recent biography of Taylor, for Taylor and his disciples “democracy . . . didn’t mean argument, negotiation, debate,
voting, or strikes. For science was at the helm now, consigning such cumbersome baggage to the past” (1997, 510). Scientific management was going to accomplish the social harmony that politics had failed to provide. It was “apolitical, even above politics. It was against social disharmony and unethical conduct and for justice, peace, cooperation, prosperity, and happiness” (Caiden 1984, 59).

Despite the blow that fascism and World War II dealt to this idea of a science of politics, there were, even in the postwar years, more than a few public administration scholars who were still quite willing to entertain this utopian idea that science might substitute for politics in the resolution of social conflict. Elton Mayo, one of the founders of what has often been termed the “human relations” approach to management, complained that “modern civilization for approximately two centuries has done nothing to extend and develop human cooperative capacities” and that, as a result, “civilization faces the latter part of the twentieth century divided into groups with few bonds of general unity, mutually suspicious, ready at any moment to develop mutual hatreds at the touch of an irresponsible orator or politician” (1945, 116–17). Mayo saw “society, within the nation and without it,” as “breaking down into groups that show an ever-increasing hostility to each other; irrational hates . . . taking the place of cooperation, . . . the precursor of downfall for many valiant civilizations” (119). The remedy for this problem was “a new type of administrator,” one “able to understand the human-social facts for what they actually are, un fettered by his own emotion or prejudice” and with “careful training” not simply in “relevant technical skills,” but, more importantly, in the “organization of cooperation,” a subject that Mayo felt had unfortunately been “ignored in universities, in industries, and in political statements” (122). Mayo looked to the careful and detailed study of human cooperation “to lead us out of the chaos of misery and malice that has overtaken our once proud civilization” (123).

Harold Lasswell, an early pioneer in the area of public policy studies, argued in a similar vein that the “roots of tension within our civilization” were to be found in “studying the psychotic, neurotic, and psychopathic manifestations of distorted development” and in discovering “the way in which specific patterns of culture warp the growth of congenial and productive interpersonal relations” (1951, 8). Once discovered and exposed, such “sources of human destructiveness” could be changed and “the basis [then] laid for a profound reconstruction of culture by continual study and not by . . . the traditional methods of political agitation” (8). In his book on *Psychopathology and Politics* ([1930] 1986), Lasswell argued more specifically that what was needed was a “politics of prevention.” In Lasswell’s words, “the time has come to abandon the assumption that the problem of politics is the problem of promoting discussion among all the interests concerned in a given problem. Discussion frequently complicates social dif-
difficulties, for the discussion by far-flung interests arouses a psychology of conflict which produces obstructive, fictitious, and irrelevant values. The problem of politics is less to solve conflicts than to prevent them; less to serve as a safety valve for social protest than to apply social energy to the abolition of recurrent sources of strain in society” (196–97). This politics of prevention, in his view, would draw “attention squarely to the central problem of strain and maladaptation in society” (197). It would rely on the “education of social administrators and social scientists” and would “be intimately allied to general medicine, psychopathology, physiological psychology, and related disciplines” (203).

Science as an Aid to Politics

In the past half century, the idea that science might actually replace the practice of politics has undoubtedly receded somewhat. Perhaps this is because the social and behavioral sciences have simply not been up to the job. They have proven unable to provide reliable remedies for resolving the various conflicts that divide us as human beings. Nonetheless, there remain those who believe that, if science cannot actually substitute for politics, it can at least make significant improvements to the way in which we govern ourselves. This idea of better governance through science has been urged on us again, in recent years, with a certain zeal by writers in the area of what has come to be termed public management. Laurence Lynn, for example, one of the more prominent and accomplished of these writers, takes our field to task for its failure “to engage in empirical validation in any scientific sense” and also for its lack of “theory-building traditions . . . analogous to those of either the disciplines or the well-established professions” (1996, 164). For Lynn, “engaging in empirical validation of predictions, conjectures, and statements is central to any scholarly activity directed at professional performance” (164). Writing with Carolyn Hill, more recently, he observes how we need to use “the formal theories, models, methods, and data of the social and behavioral sciences to study governmental processes” so as to “develop a body of empirical knowledge concerning what works and why” (Hill and Lynn 2004, 5). Also, Jeff Gill and Kenneth Meier have set forth what they boldly choose to term a “methodological manifesto” for our field, arguing that “public administration research has fallen notably behind research in related fields in terms of methodological sophistication” (2000, 157), and that what we need is “a greatly enhanced focus on empiricism and rigorous quantitative approaches” (195).

What is most notable about these recent crusaders for a scientifically more rigorous public administration is that they seek to transcend the shopworn politics-administration dichotomy and urge us to adopt a more scientific approach to the
study and practice, not simply of the administration of particular agencies, but of entire systems of governance. Laurence Lynn, Carolyn Heinrich, and Carolyn Hill, for example, see social science research as needing to address what they believe is the “general issue of governance,” namely, how “public-sector regimes, agencies, programs, and activities [can] be organized and managed to achieve public purposes” (2000, 234). In their view, this is an issue that should be of concern to “officials in all branches and at all levels of the public sector: legislators, elected and appointed executives, and judges at federal, state, and local levels of government” (234). Kenneth Meier expresses a similarly expansive view of a social science approach to public administration when he argues that we need to “redefine the field of public administration to encompass the design, evaluation, and implementation of institutions and public policy” (1997, 194). Seeking to extend the ideas of Herbert Simon, he argues that public administration research should become “the science of the artificial for both politics and administration” (195). In short, these authors seek to use the techniques of mainstream quantitative social science to answer not merely managerial questions but also the broad types of political questions that have managed to preoccupy and puzzle political philosophers and observers for centuries, if not millennia.

In Defense of Politics

In light of this renewed enthusiasm among public management writers for the application of social science to both the design and operation of our systems of governance, as well as the longstanding antipathy towards politics in our field, a defense of politics in administration therefore would seem especially timely, and that is why I have written this book. I argue here that the practice of politics is useful, if not actually necessary, to the moral conduct of government and public administration. This is because it serves to protect the value pluralism or moral conflict that is an integral part of our moral experience as human beings. In this book, I examine the idea of value pluralism and the role that politics plays in helping to protect value pluralism in political discourse and practice within a political community. In doing so, I draw, in significant part, upon the writings of Isaiah Berlin, Stuart Hampshire, and Bernard Crick, all of whom understood the character of value conflict and its close relationship to politics. The implications of this analysis for public administration will be examined. It is argued here that public administrators need to go beyond the science-based instrumental rationalism and determinism that characterize too much of our field and to recognize that the management of conflicting values is an essential part of their responsibilities. Also, I explore how administrators might learn from the advers-
sary reasoning that is characteristic of the political process and incorporate it, more self-consciously, into their own decision making.

Chapter 2 of this book begins the argument by examining Berlin's idea of value pluralism and how this pluralism is central to our moral experience, both in making our own moral choices among conflicting moral ends or conceptions of the good and in living with others whose moral ends happen to differ from ours. It is argued here that, far from being a form of relativism, value pluralism is an essential part of our moral experience and that in fact, without it, morality and moral choices, at least as we have come to understand them, would disappear. This chapter also emphasizes the importance of moral conflict to decision making in government and public administration and its special relevance to the problem of the “dirty hands” dilemma in government.

Chapter 3 uses the writings of Crick to examine the historical meaning and function of politics and shows the special role of politics in helping us to deal with moral conflicts in a manner that minimizes the need for force and violence. I argue here that politics helps to promote moral conduct because it encourages governments to be responsive to a variety of different values or conceptions of the good held by different groups in society. Politics also makes it easier for individuals and groups in society to pursue their own values because it allows individuals a measure of freedom from government interference and because it helps to promote a more peaceful coexistence among these individuals and groups.

Following this, in chapter 4 I examine the conflict that exists between politics and the vision of governance proposed by mainstream social scientists in public administration and especially by writers in public management. I argue here that a scientific approach to the study of governance, when taken alone, gives insufficient weight to its inherently political character because it advances an instrumental rationalist and deterministic vision of governance and, in doing so, downplays the conflicts of values and the uncertainty that are an inherent part of the way in which we have come to govern ourselves. As a result, this approach to governance may not be as helpful to the practice of public administration or governance as its advocates seem to think. Moreover, there is a risk that if public administrators and other government officials were to embrace this science-based approach too enthusiastically, to the point of excluding other more humanistic approaches, it could even harm the practice of governance. The chapter concludes that what we need is a pluralist approach to public administration that takes account of the political character of our system of governance and that recognizes that public administrators must often make choices among competing values.

Chapter 5 explores just what such a pluralist approach to public administra-
tion might look like by examining more closely how it is that politics is able to reconcile conflicts among groups holding rival conceptions of the good. Drawing on the ideas of Hampshire, it is argued here that political institutions can provide a set of locally accepted practices of procedural justice that help to resolve conflict by means of adversarial argument or “hearing the other side” rather than by force. This suggests, in the American context, the particular relevance of our constitutional practices in dealing with moral conflict. I argue here that our constitutional and political practices have led to a politicization of public administration that makes it difficult, if not impossible, for administrators to act in an apolitical or purely instrumental rationalist fashion and, furthermore, has the effect of forcing public administrators to take account of multiple and conflicting perspectives in making their decisions. In doing so, these practices serve to protect values that are held to be important by different groups in society by providing multiple opportunities for hearing the other side on issues involving these values. The protection and enhancement of these practices for hearing the other side is, therefore, a necessary part of a pluralist approach to public administration.

Finally, chapter 6 examines how the process of adversarial argument or hearing the other side that is characteristic of politics might help public administrators engage in a process of practical moral reasoning as part of a pluralist approach to public administration. It is argued here that a more self-conscious cultivation within the mind of an internalized process of adversary reasoning—one that is derived from our social practices for resolving moral conflict—can be useful to public administrators in both thinking about and dealing more effectively with conflicting values. I also argue here that public administrators can engage more effectively in this type of practical moral reasoning by drawing upon the type of rationality that is reflected in legal arguments and upon the imaginative skills that can be fostered by reading literature and history.

Methodological Approach

The methodology employed in this book might best be described as a “history of ideas.” Berlin, himself a self-professed student of the history of ideas, once described this as the “history of what we believe that people thought and felt” (Berlin and Jahanbegloo 1991, 28). This involves, for him, an examination of “beliefs, attitudes and mental and emotional habits, some of which are vague and undefined, others of which have become crystallised into religious, legal or political systems, moral doctrines, social outlooks, psychological dispositions and so forth” (Berlin 2000, 69). Similarly, for Roger Hausheer, the history of ideas can be seen as an attempt, among other things, “to trace the birth and de-
velopment of some of the ruling concepts of a civilization or culture through long periods of mental change, and to reconstruct the image men have of themselves and their activities, in a given age and culture” (1982, xvii). It includes an examination of the basic ideas or concepts in terms of which men and women “have seen themselves and framed their aspirations” (xvi).

The purpose of such an enquiry is to attempt to understand some of the basic categories, concepts, or patterns that all of us, including social scientists, have come to use in making sense of human experience and, especially, those aspects of human experience concerned with politics and governance. Some of these categories are more permanent and some of them are more transitory. Some of them are more universal in the sense that they seem to appear across different cultures whereas others are more local. However, together these categories form the “spectacles” or lenses through which we look at the facts or data of human actions and experience. They involve notions such as “society, freedom, sense of time and change, suffering, happiness, productivity, good and bad, right and wrong, choice, effort, truth, illusion” (Berlin 1979, 166). By understanding these categories, we can gain an awareness of both the factual and normative presuppositions that undergird our perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and values.

As a field of enquiry, public administration has, of course, from time to time drawn on the history of ideas for insight, including a few early writers in public administration such as Woodrow Wilson and Frank Goodnow. In recent years, a number of contemporary writers such as John Rohr (1986), Richard Stillman (1998), and Camilla Stivers (2000a) have also demonstrated how an examination of the history of political and social ideas can be helpful to the study and practice of contemporary public administration. Nonetheless, it remains true that, at least among our mainstream public administration writers, there is a marked tendency to downplay the importance of the history of political and social ideas in public administration enquiry. In this respect, many of them would still seem to follow the lead of Lyndall Urwick, who wrote in the 1930s that human organizations or administrative systems can be examined without regard to “any constitutional, political or social theory underlying [their] creation” (1937, 49). This tendency to de-emphasize political and social ideas is evident in recent years, for example, among contemporary writers in the so-called reinventing government or new public management movement. These writers argue that the problems of government are managerial rather than political or ideological, and that the solution to these problems is a more entrepreneurial approach to public administration rather than new public policies or, for that matter, new political institutions. Reinventing government, for them, is both politically and ideologically neutral. It is about “how government should work,” not “what it should do” (Gore 1993, ii), and its principles are applicable “regardless of party, regard-
less of ideology” (6). Furthermore, these principles can be applied universally across all kinds of political systems with quite different political ideologies and traditions. As these writers see it, their strategies “work in small cities and large nations, in parliamentary systems and presidential systems, in strong mayor cities and council-manager cities” (Osborne and Plastrik 1997, 44). Different types of political systems and organizations may require different tactics, in their view, but “none of these differences changes the basic levers that create fundamental change” so that “reinvention applies to all types of organizations” (47). Implicit in the rhetoric of these writers is the idea that any enquiry into the history of political and social ideas is relatively unimportant—if not actually irrelevant—to public administration. Indeed, the very terms “reinventing government” and “new public management” strongly intimate the irrelevance of such a history.

Nonetheless, in my view, an examination of the history of ideas, especially moral and political ideas, is not only desirable but also essential to understanding public administration. This is because, despite the aforementioned indifference of many scholars in the field to broad and abstract moral and political ideas, such ideas permeate the categories or presuppositions that we bring to the examination of the facts of human experience and action in government. Much as we might try, we cannot shut them out, since they shape the very language we use to describe these facts. As Mark Rutgers has reminded us in his recent article on comparative public administration, the meanings of the words that we employ in this vocabulary are always “embedded in specific conceptual and cultural (legal, historical and political) backgrounds” (2004, 151). The meanings of words like public administration, government, constitution, law, democracy, citizen, and legislature are inextricably connected through our mental frameworks to what it is that we think government does, can do, or ought to do. Also, at a deeper level, the meanings that we attach to these words are tied to our notions of morality and what we think of as being human. In this sense, one cannot think, talk, or write about human beings as such in the absence of moral considerations, because the concept of what it means to be a human being is inevitably suffused with value judgments of some sort or other. Of course, a degree of evenhandedness may be possible and is certainly desirable, but neutrality itself is simply not a realistic option for us. Indeed, as Berlin observes, we can rarely, if ever, “achieve neutrality” in statements about “moral and social life” because the words we must employ in making such statements are “inescapably charged with ethical or aesthetic or political content” (1979, 157). In the study of history, for example, valuations—“moral, political, aesthetic”—are “intrinsic . . . to the subject matter” (Berlin 1969, 92), and “our historical language, the words and thoughts with which we attempt to reflect about or describe past events and persons, embody moral concepts and categories” (95). As Berlin notes, in think-
ing about the harm done by Adolf Hitler, for instance, “the very use of normal language cannot avoid conveying what the author regards as commonplace or monstrous, decisive or trivial, exhilarating or depressing. In describing what occurred, I can say that so many million men were brutally done to death; or alternatively, that they perished; laid down their lives; were massacred; or simply, that the population of Europe was reduced, or that its average age was lowered; or that many men lost their lives. None of these descriptions of what took place is wholly neutral: all carry moral implications” (xxix).

In other words, we cannot help but use moral and political ideas when thinking about human experience and action in government. This being the case, we should therefore at least try to be self-conscious when we do make use of these ideas. As Berlin puts it, “to neglect the field of political thought” is “merely to allow oneself to remain at the mercy of primitive and uncriticized political beliefs” (1969, 119). Waldo certainly understood the importance of such self-awareness within our field when he wrote in the 1980s that “the literature of public administration contains elements that are political theory as this is conventionally understood” and that “it serves useful functions to identify such elements and to examine them carefully: to trace their ancestry, to identify their analogs, to examine critically their intended explicit uses and their possible implicit functions in the political system” (1984, x). Waldo makes clear here how closely political and moral ideas are tied to the study and practice of public administration. Certainly, in his view, “there are limited, technical areas where public administrationists can escape, practically speaking, from concern with political theory; but, nevertheless, in their central concerns they cannot avoid this encounter. It is, rather, a matter of the level of consciousness and the degree of intelligence that is brought to the encounter” (lvii).

Greater self-awareness about moral and political ideas in public administration enquiry and education is something for which we ought to strive for a number of reasons. For one thing, if scholars in public administration, as well as the practitioners whom they help educate and train, do not bother to think about the moral and political ideas that undergird both past and present administrative ideas and practices, then both are likely to remain vulnerable to seduction by ideas and reforms that are really not as new as they appear to be, but, to the contrary, have often been tried before and found wanting. For example, administrative reforms that would have us run our system of governance and administration more like a business enterprise or corporation, reforms such as reinventing government and, before it, such reforms as program budgeting, zero-base budgeting, and MBO, arise in the United States over and over again as if, each time, they were entirely new and unrelated to any intellectual traditions in our past. Were scholars and practitioners to pay more attention to the history
of ideas, they might become more aware of and sensitive to the problems and pitfalls that have beset the efforts of past political and administrative reformers. They might be less susceptible to the superficial novelty of such ideas as “entrepreneurial” or “mission-driven” government and more inclined to look at them circumspectly. In this regard, an examination of the history of ideas can provide scholars and practitioners a richer intellectual context that can help them better evaluate administrative ideas and reforms. By providing such a context, an exposure to the history of our ideas can at least provide some partial protection, some degree of immunity, against the recurring fads or what Christopher Hood and Michael Jackson term “the administrative fashion, ‘consultocracy,’ . . . pop management,” and “many incentives for amnesia” (1994, 484) that so often tend to infect our thinking and practice.

Moreover, unless we are self-conscious about the moral and political ideas that are intimated in our words, writings, and actions, then there is a danger that public administration—both as a field of study and a practice—may become susceptible to influence by ideas that are not simply somewhat unhelpful, but are actually destructive of values we have come to cherish. In doing so, given the way in which ideas can influence practice, if we neglect the history of our moral and political ideas, then we may risk more than simply disappointment. As Berlin rightly reminded us, “Men cannot live without seeking to describe and explain the universe to themselves. The models they use in doing this must deeply affect their lives, not least when they are unconscious; much of the misery and frustration of men is due to the mechanical or unconscious, as well as deliberate, application of models where they do not work” (1979, 10).

When he wrote these words, Berlin had in mind, of course, the abuses and horrors resulting from twentieth-century totalitarianism. However, the dangers of not paying enough attention to our moral and political ideas are by no means limited to societies ruled by totalitarian despots. Rosenbloom has warned us, for example, how, here in the United States, in their quest for keys to better and more cost-effective governance, “practitioners and public administration scholars have, at best, marginalized and, at worst, been contemptuous of democratic-constitutional values” (2007, 28). Detailing recent enhancements of executive power and various abuses of administrative power, including those at Abu Ghraib, Rosenbloom observes how “regardless of what drives today’s administrative reformers—cost-effectiveness, business-like models, faith in executive power, social equity, accountability for results or other concerns—they infrequently focus on whether their prescriptions will promote or diminish individual rights, constitutional integrity, transparency, and the rule of law” (36).

For these reasons, it is thus incumbent upon those of us who think about, write about, and teach public administration to understand and appreciate bet-
ter the history of our moral and political ideas. This is particularly important at a time when our field seems increasingly dominated by a narrow instrumental rationalism and scientism. It may be argued, of course, that the pursuit of such an approach to public administration enquiry and education may render it too theoretical and too far removed from the practical day-to-day concerns of public administrators. However, to assert this is to ignore the argument made here that the moral and political ideas which we expound in our writings and in our classes, whether consciously or unconsciously, exert an influence over the practice of public administration and governance. As my good friend the late Larry Terry once said, “those concerned with public management and practice must not lose sight of the fact that ideas matter; they do have consequences” (1998, 198).