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Competing Ontologies: A Primer for Public Administration

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A growing number of public administration theorists are taking up the question of ontology—the nature of existence. This primer on the topic provides a basic explanation of ontology, describes the fundamental debates in the competing ontologies of Western philosophy, and discusses why ontology is important to social and political theory, as well as to public administration theory and practice. Using an ideal-type approach, the author analyzes how different ontologies imply particular political forms that undergird public administration theories and practices. This ideal-type model can be used to identify the ontological assumptions in these theories and practices. The article concludes with an invitation for personal reflection on the part of scholars and practitioners in regard to which ontology best fits their experience and beliefs and the alternatives that we might pursue for a better future.

Ontology is a theory of existence, being, or reality. For those who accept the basic premises of modern Western culture, it is probably difficult to imagine why public administration theorists are even talking about things like this. Don't all rational people agree on the basics? If not, surely these issues are questions for philosophy, religion, or physics. Public administration scholars should focus on the theoretical questions of scientific methods and alternative ways of knowing as the basis for our theory and practice. Indeed, our field invests a good deal of attention in these problems of epistemology in shaping administrative study (see, e.g., Adams 1992; Box 1992; Houston and Delevan 1990, 1994; Raadschelders 1999, 2000; White 1986) as well as practice (see, e.g., Hummel 1991; Schmidt 1993; Hummel 1998; Farmer 2010). However, some suggest that this focus has actually served to deflect attention from deeper philosophical commitments that have direct bearing on our political practices. Such inquiry

would serve to link "a fundamental conception of reality (ontology) with a specific epistemological position . . . with a distinctive form of the political" (Catlaw 2007a, 11). Indeed, this is a project that Dwight Waldo (1984) began in his critique of the administrative state. These concepts shape philosophical and value commitments of all types. Identifying such fundamental assumptions makes clear how particular political forms are thought to be appropriate or even *necessary* based on the nature of being.

Therefore, a growing number of public administration theorists are taking up the question of ontology as the most fundamental basis for claims about all aspects of governance (Stout and Salm 2011; see, e.g., Catlaw 2007a; Catlaw and Jordan 2009; McSwite 2006; Howe 2006; Hummel 2002; Farmer 2002; Stivers 2002a, 2002b; King and Kensen 2002; King and Zanetti 2005; Stout 2007, 2010a, 2010b; Evans 2000; Murray 2000; Mingus 2000; Evans and Wamsley 1999; Wamsley 1996). In a Founders' Forum panel session at the 2010 American Society for Public Administration conference, practitioners embraced the theoretical discussion of alternative understandings of ontology and human identity that are linked to practices of direct democracy, noting that it actually helped them make sense of why things such as collaboration, public participation, and international development are successful (or not). In fact, the panel was one of the highest rated of the conference, according to its organizers. Given this extraordinary response, the purpose of this article is to provide a primer on ontology that gives practitioners a starting framework as they build their own understandings of how what we believe about existence makes a difference in what we do in practice.

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This introduction begins with a basic explanation of ontology and how particular ideas have

come forward in Western culture. These ideas are then used to generate an ideal-type model that can be used to understand ontology and the various beliefs and theories that it undergirds. The discussion continues with why ontology is important to political theory, and to public administration in particular. The article then turns to an analysis of how differing ontologies imply particular political forms that are assumed by public administration theories and practices. To illustrate, the ontological ideal-type model is used to examine various theories. The article concludes with an invitation for personal reflection on the part of scholars and practitioners in regard to their own ontological commitments, as well as encouragement to join in further theoretical development of ontologies alternative to that of modern Western culture.

What Is Ontology?

Ontologies are theories of existence that generally stem from philosophy, religion, or physics. To begin an exploration of competing ontologies, it is helpful to employ an ideal-type model (Weber 1949, 1994) to draw out principal differences (Stout 2010c). For example, differing "onto-stories" (Bennett 2001; Howe 2006) claim that existence is static versus dynamic in state; whole versus plural in expression; transcendent versus immanent in its source; and individualistic versus relational in condition. Static means that being simply *is*—we can know its truth through various means. Dynamic means that existence is continually becoming, and so understanding it is difficult beyond temporary "snapshots" of its expression. Whole means that the source of existence is complete—it cannot be broken apart in some way. Plural means that there are many sources of existence. Transcendent means that the source of being is beyond that which exists. Immanent means that the source of being is within that which exists. Individualistic means that being is contained within itself, whether it is considered as an abstract single whole or a plurality of actual singular units. Relational means that apparently separate beings are actually connected in some way.

Discussion of these opposing characteristics traces back to the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers Parmenides and Heraclitus, who offer differing conceptualizations of the nature of being and knowing (Graham 2002; Heidegger 1992). While the ancient language and style of their writings can be difficult to follow, it is worth knowing their stories because they are the basis for Western ontologies.

Parmenides is considered the father of Western philosophy (Palmer 2008) and the positivist science that followed. Based on an allegorical revelation from the goddess Truth, Parmenides claims that reality *is* (static) a unity (whole). Thus, there is and can be only one Truth. Our perception of change (dynamic) and difference (plural) is merely an illusion called the Way of Appearance. The Way of Truth is to understand that reality is one unchangeable, timeless, indestructible whole. Existence is assumed to be eternal because nothing can come from nothing. "Nothing" is referred to as the void, which cannot exist. "What Is imperceptibly interpenetrates or runs through all things while yet maintaining its own identity distinct from theirs" (Palmer 2008, sec. 3.5, para. 11). Thus, the source of being is also transcendent—separate from the physical (immanent) universe.

According to Heraclitus, you can never step into the same river twice. He has been described as the father of process philosophy (Christ 2003). Reality *becomes* (dynamic) and is therefore

Table 1 Principal Western Ontological Dichotomies Matrix

Ontological Characteristics	Whole Expression Transcendent Source	Plural Expression Immanent Source
Static State	*Undifferentiated Individual* The human being is an imperfect copy of a metaphysical source that is whole and complete	*Differentiated Individual* The human being is an independent psychophysical source that is whole and complete—"universe of one"
Dynamic State	*Undifferentiated Relational* The human being is an evolving expression of a metaphysical source that expresses itself throughout creation	*Differentiated Relational* The human being is an evolving unique expression of a complex, relational, multidimensional source

a multitude (plural) across time, if nothing else. Thus, there are many truths. He claims that the only universal principle is change, and all that exists is in a constant state of becoming and dissolving, which produces a particular harmony or balance at any given point in time. Yet, he notes that the substance of each state is the same—there is an essence of becoming that expresses itself in many potentialities, as noted in the phrase "from all things one and from one all things." Therefore, the source of existence is immanent. The opposing processes of formation and dissolution are the source of a creative conflict through which all things become (Graham 2008, sec. 3.2, para. 4). However, neither half of the binary can be said to exist separately from the other: they compose a whole.[1]

If we put these ideas into a two-by-two matrix, we can start to shape a description of four positions that describe being (see table 1), and therefore human being (our principal concern in public administration), in quite different ways. This ideal-type model can be used to examine not only ontologies, but also theories and practices to identify what their underlying ontological assumptions might be. To help us focus on the human form of being, each position is labeled with a different form of human identity. As fully explicated by Jeannine Love, different meanings of the term *individual* "refer to very different ways of being in the world and therefore represent . . . incompatible stories about reality" (2010, 3). Historically, these differing ontological positions mutually influence one another and are rarely present in pure form within any one philosopher's thinking or any one political theory. In this sense, they are indeed ideal-typical (Weber 1949). In fact, many alternative ontologies seek "a new creative synthesis" (Christ 2003, 224) of these competing characteristics, rather than relying on one position alone.

In the Undifferentiated Individual position, the human being (one) is an imperfect copy of a metaphysical source that is whole and complete (One). Because human beings are separate from the source of being, they are placed in a hierarchical relationship to it that looks something like a modern organizational chart (see figure 1). Because each individual is attempting to be like the source of being,
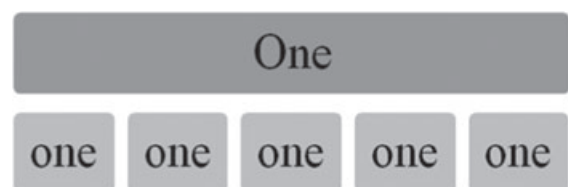

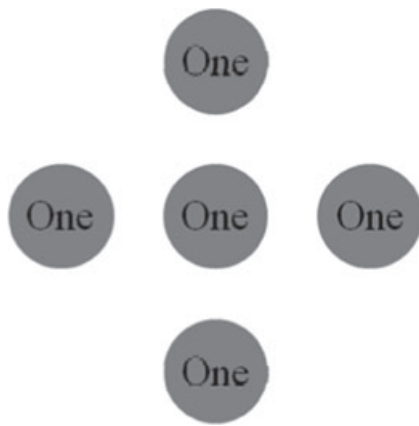**Figure 1 Undifferentiated Individual Ontology**

Figure 2 Differentiated Individual Ontology

they are not differentiated and rather homogenous, as in Love's (2010) *institutional individualism.* Being a part of the whole gives one a sense of identity.

In the Differentiated Individual position, the source of being is within each being—there is no innate hierarchical arrangement, and each individual can be described as a "universe of One" (see figure 2). This is a Hobbesian ontology in which a complete disconnection or uniqueness sets individuals apart, with a belief that they are completely on their own in the state of nature (Stivers 2008)—bonds must be created through social mechanisms. Following this line of thinking, Love (2010) calls this *atomistic individualism*—the classical Cartesian, unitary subject (Farmer 2005).

In the Undifferentiated Relational position, the source of being (One) is both beyond and within all beings (one) (see figure 3). Because of this, there is no actual differentiation among what only appear to be the individual parts. This position does not lend itself to any familiar notion of the individual, except for perhaps something like the Borg of *Star Trek* (Frakes 1996). It may be better conceptualized as a complete unity of both divine and mundane elements in the universe, similar to the Hindu understanding of Brahman or the Buddhist understanding of Tao Te Ching (Brodd 2003).

In the Differentiated Relational position, the source of being (One) is within all beings, and all beings (one) are connected by virtue
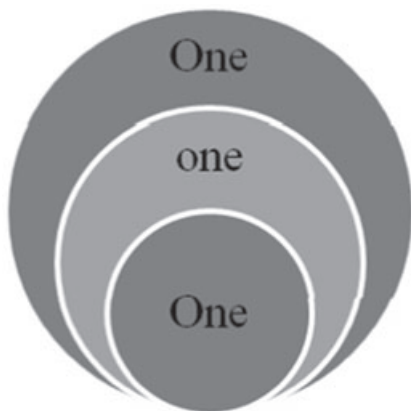

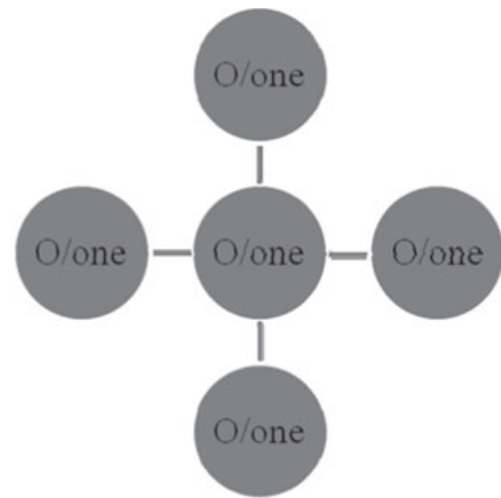**Figure 3 Undifferentiated Relational Ontology**

Figure 4 Differentiated Relational Ontology

of this shared source, and yet they are differentiated and unique in their expression (see figure 4). Thus, related beings are both One and one (O/one). The individual is multidimensional and exists within a social context and is therefore both influenced by and influencing the environment. Love (2010) calls this the *integrated individual,* which is synonymous with Follett's (1995a, 1995b) understanding of the individual in the group and society and Dewey's (1999) understanding of the new individualism.

These varying understandings of the nature of existence and human being also have different implications for social life, often referred to as "political ontology," which describes related assumptions about the nature of human being, identity, and social life (Catlaw 2007a; Howe 2006). This brings us to the next question at hand: why is ontology important to political theory?

Why Is Ontology Important to Political Theory?

As expressed by the term *political ontology*, ontology and political theory are in a directional causal relationship: ontology suggests the possibility and/or correctness of only certain political forms. For example, modern Western ontology is associated with the static, plural universe of positivism, atomistic individualism, and materially self-interested human beings, which lead to modern liberal political forms. In this way, political ontology depicts both what is and what *should be*—it describes what is believed to be the constitutive Good, the source of good as well as good ends (Taylor 1989). This notion is reflected in the writings of political theorist Carl Schmitt (1985), who asserts that theories of the state are secularized theological concepts. In other words, the State is a stand-in for God. Public administration scholar Fred Thayer makes the same point in suggesting that the ultimate problem for political theory is, "Who is authorized to speak for God?" (1981, A-14). This is similar to the problem of who is authorized to speak for the People (Catlaw 2007a). Consequently, ontology is important to political theory because it *frames presuppositions about all aspects of life and what is good and right*. Ontological assumptions drive everything from the question of sovereignty to a public ethic and the proper institutions of government.

Therefore, political theorist Robert Cox asserts that "the first task of a contemporary political theory is to declare its ontology"

(1995, 36). Accordingly, scholars are turning away from unthinking adoption of the philosophical commitments that characterize modern Western culture, both critiquing its underlying ontology and offering affirmative modifications or alternatives (White 2000). In a reverse engineering process, social practices are deconstructed and analyzed in order to understand the types of entities (human and other) that are presupposed and the assumed nature of their being. An example of this is Hendriks's (2010) ideal-type model of democracy, which is linked downward to the political and societal cultures underlying each type. Once ideas are "unpacked" (Crowley 1997) in this way, the philosophical commitments and associated values are assessed, considering their implications for social outcomes. In short, what we believe about reality guides what we do, and sometimes we do not like the results. So, we critique what we believe using a variety of theoretical lenses (e.g., critical social theory, postmodern philosophy, feminist theory, cultural studies, etc.) in order to recommend change.

Such critiques and alternatives are emerging because modern Western culture and its "Eurocentric masculine conventions" (Pulitano 2003, 30) have become ontologically hegemonic. This means two things—first, there are multiple ways to understand existence, and "ours" is only one. Second, "our" way is marginalizing others: "We think that in conjunction with its political and military branches, Modwestcult [modern Western culture] is engaging in a much less obvious form of colonization—that is over the territory of what kind of being is permitted to be recognized as human" (Beeman and Blenkinsop 2008, 97). This has led to ever-increasing homogenization in spite of superficial attention to diversity based on things such as race or aesthetic cultural preferences. There is more to difference than mere cultural adaptation or nuance: there are differences in our very understanding of human *being*.

In a globalizing society in which contact and competition among ontologies are increasing, scholars and practitioners are advised to explore their own beliefs and their differences with cultural others. However, alternative ontologies subsist within what is assumed to be Western culture based on geography (e.g., the global North). Many citizens of Western nations experience "ontological colonization" (Stout 2010d), including feminists, indigenous peoples, and pretty much anyone who does not accept Newtonian/Cartesian reality as a natural given (e.g., quantum physicists, Eastern mystics, etc.). These citizens' views may be marginalized by the dominant culture, but refusal is an increasing trend, as evidenced in a broad range of cultural studies (see, e.g., Brigg 2007; Pesch 2008).

Given these increasingly pluralist conditions, Steven White (2000) makes an argument that "weak" ontologies are better suited to contemporary society either because they are open to contestation and plurality or because they inherently embrace change and fluidity, which enables adaptation. Weak does not connote thin, however. Weak ontologies can provide a robust and detailed explication and yet remain fluid in character as amendable normative affirmations. Examples can be found in process philosophy (Stout and Staton 2011) and indigenous spirituality (Stout 2010). Contrarily, "strong" ontologies are fixed and rigid in character, claiming to represent permanent Truth. As such, they are colonizing in nature when confronting alternatives. Table 2 adds these characteristics to the ideal-types under consideration.

Why Is Ontology Important to Public Administration?

Political philosophy informs action and therefore largely informs public administration theory. The need for such foundations has been noted by key scholars (see, e.g, Box 2008; Catlaw 2007a; Gaus 1947; McSwite 1997; Waldo 1984; Wamsley 1996). As Waldo suggests, "Any political theory rests upon a *metaphysic, a concept of the ultimate nature of reality*" (1984, 21; emphasis added). Spicer similarly argues that theories of public administration are "tied to . . . *what we think of as being human*" (2004, 354; emphasis added). These are simply other ways of describing ontology. But ontology impacts more than theory. Because it frames presuppositions "about the human relationship to things such as self, world, and others" (Howe 2006, 423), ontology shapes how we go about living together, directly impacting public policy (Christ 2003).

Therefore, public administration theorist Gary Wamsley (1996) insists that ontological disclosure is the only appropriate platform from which one can make normative claims about the way things should be. In other words, one must describe how the nature of reality *necessitates* the recommendations being made. Such commitments are not easily brushed aside and demand logical congruence all the way from beliefs to practices so that incongruence does not generate "ontological angst" (Evans and Wamsley 1999, 119). If the nature of reality is in conflict with how we perceive it, then our socially constructed reality will be incongruent and thus problematic. If our institutions are based on faulty assumptions, then the results will be similarly problematic. So, the goal is to think through how ontology, political form, and resulting practices can be aligned in a logical manner that leads to desirable results.

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Accordingly, some scholars believe that specific administrative structures are embedded within particular philosophical systems and assumptions about human nature (Kirlin 1996; Ostrom 1997). "If the result desired is . . . [a particular political form], then these organizations ought to be grounded in theories, assumptions, and *understandings of reality* that advance knowledge of, and give direction toward, attaining such a polity" (Kelly 1998, 201; emphasis added). It is from these assumptions that theories obtain their claim to legitimacy. Evans and Wamsley suggest that competing claims (e.g., public management versus public administration) are ontological struggles to prove administration's "legitimate role in the governance process" (1999, 123). Therefore, identifying the underlying ontological assumptions of administrative theory is critical not only to understand and evaluate

Table 2 Strong versus Weak Ontologies

Ontological Characteristics	Whole Expression Transcendent Source	Plural Expression Immanent Source
Static/Individual State	Strong	Strong
Dynamic/Relational State	Strong	Weak

legitimacy claims in public administration, but to establish normative goals for practice.

Arguments along these lines have been present in public administration theory at least since the mid-1940s. Morstein Marx argues, "Perhaps our sorest lack is doctrine in the theological sense to govern the flow of cooperative energies in a free commonwealth" (1946, 503). "We have not shown the courage to include politics fully in our study and, thereby, to face the ontological question of our purposes" (Evans and Wamsley 1999, 133). Thayer (1981) asserts that we can no longer afford to accept the philosophical assumptions of political theory as axiomatic. Instead, we must bring such assumptions into the domain of public administration inquiry. When theories about legitimate political authority are grounded in notions of human nature (Caldwell 1988), we cannot simply accept those assumptions without question. Nor can we assume that there is only one correct answer to questions such as, "How should an administrator behave in relationship to others?" (Farmer 1995, 227). For example, the possibilities include relationships of dominance and submission, as in the master–slave metaphor, as well as difference without domination, as in the eastern understanding of dialectic (Carr and Zanetti 1999). These relationships rest on different ontological ground—one admits hierarchy and one does not.

Unfortunately, despite urgings from Cox (1995) and Wamsley (1996), most scholars do not claim an ontological source in their prescriptions for practice. Instead, they do so indirectly by accepting assumptions embedded in political theory. Public administration scholars adopt commitments to particular political forms and recommend practices that are logically congruent. This brings us to the next question: how are ontologies linked to specific political forms?

How Are Ontologies Linked to Specific Political Forms?

Complex political forms have been predicated on the notion of representation because, if nothing else, as Dahl (1998) points out, most social groups are too large to function without some kind of representation. Yet, what is deemed proper or legitimate representation is a widely debated question in a democratic society. Perhaps for this reason, political theorist Hanna Pitkin (1972) identifies four distinct types of representation: formalistic (authorization and accountability), symbolic (metaphor), descriptive (demographic), and substantive (values and interests). In formalistic systems, Edmund Burke (1854) identifies key differences between delegate and trustee styles. As noted earlier, Thayer (1981) believes that any form of governance

creates the problem of who speaks for God. He asserts that Western culture has tried two ways of answering that question: through hierarchy and through competition. In other words, representation can be decided either through dictate or through pluralism.

In exploring the political ontology of public administration, Catlaw (2007a) takes on the problem of representation most broadly, through what he calls the ontology of representation—the assumption that anything or anyone can represent what is true, right, and good. He suggests that any form of representation forces unique individuals into a model–copy relationship: one or some representatives are designated to determine what the model is, and everyone else must copy the model provided. While this explanation of the issue can seem very abstract, it does simplify the problem of who is authorized to represent by calling into question the very possibility of representation. Therefore, adding to the ideal-types, table 3 shows how political representation fits with the different ontological positions.

Looking at the four positions, the Undifferentiated Individual ontology depicts a situation in which there is a hierarchy between the divine and the mundane that creates a primary relation of domination (e.g., God over people). Only those who have a special relationship with the One can represent it and demand compliance with its image of Good (Thayer 1981, A-14). As Schmitt (1985) suggests, an analogous relationship is claimed by the leader of a state to its citizens.

The Differentiated Individual ontology brings the source of being into the natural world (e.g., Nature), of which discrete human beings are a part. While it is static in nature and thus knowable, superior reason is required to fully understand it. This position can be described as the Enlightenment ontology of disengaged reason (Taylor 1989). Specifically, it claims that each individual's ability to reason is the constitutive good and thus discounts those who are less reasoned (e.g., women, peasants, indigenous peoples, animals, etc.). This ontology grounds all forms of pluralist competition. However, because individuals are static in nature, representatives can be legitimately chosen based on similarity of beliefs or superior reasoning abilities.

The Undifferentiated Relational ontology holds that the source of being is both transcendent and within each being, expressing itself through what can only be perceived as many beings, but which is, in

Table 3 Implications for Representation

Ontological Characteristics	Whole Expression Transcendent Source	Plural Expression Immanent Source
Static State	*Undifferentiated Individual* Representation is almost required—someone or something with superior reason must speak for the source of being	*Differentiated Individual* Representation is possible because identity is fixed and unchanging—one can know their own and others' interests and speak for them
Dynamic State	*Undifferentiated Relational* Representation is possible because individuals are interchangeable expressions of the whole	*Differentiated Relational* Representation is *not* possible because of an ever-changing identity and mutual influences

Table 4 Associated Political and Religious Forms

Ontological Characteristics	Whole Expression Transcendent Source	Plural Expression Immanent Source
Static State	*Undifferentiated Individual* Classical Conservative Liberalism (republicanism)	*Differentiated Individual* Modern Liberalism
	Monism (king, queen, pope) Statism	Individualist Anarchism
	Monotheism (external divine being/source of being)	Atheism (natural being)
		Polytheism (all beings are divine but embodied)
Dynamic State	*Undifferentiated Relational* Socialism	*Differentiated Relational* Social Anarchism
	Collectivism	Humanism (humanity is sacred)
	Pantheism (all are parts of the divine being/source of being)	Panentheism (all beings are divine but embodied)

reality, only changing components of the whole. The imagery is similar to a hologram, in which the whole is reflected in each part. Therefore, representation is possible because each part is fully interchangeable.

The Differentiated Relational ontology assumes that the source of being is the sum all of being and in a constant state of mutual becoming. Representation is *not* possible because of an ever-changing identity and mutual influences, among other things (see Catlaw 2006, 2007a, 2007b). This position has been taken up by postmodern philosophers, with the more skeptical (Rosenau 1992) denying the notion of any type of innate connection. This is reflected in Love's (2010) *fragmented, decentered individual.* However, affirmative postmodern philosophers (Rosenau 1992) tend to acknowledge at least the capacity for connectedness, if not an innate social bond through which all are mutually impacting.

Considering these assumptions about representation, table 4 shows the political and religious forms that are associated with the ontological ideal-types. As might be predicted, the Undifferentiated Individual ontology is most aligned with monism on theistic grounds (Taylor 1989) because the source of being is beyond the natural world. Traditionally, the church and royalty have represented this transcendent source. However the ontology enables an analogous externalization of authority into a conception of a sovereign state (Schmitt 1985). Taken to its extreme, this logic supports the notion that the State exists separate from its citizens, pursuing its own ends, as with Hegel's idealized unity (Willoughby 1930). Thinking generically, this ontological position lends itself to any form of authoritarian governance claiming sovereignty. In the context of democracy, such authority is moderated in classical conservative liberalism or what some refer to as republicanism.[2] Under the authoritative banner of state, law, constitution, or some other source of sovereignty, individuals are gathered together in abstract through the social contract.

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The Differentiated Individual ontology is related to modern liberalism and its pluralist, competitive processes. Liberalism assumes a Lockean utilitarian human nature that causes self-interested, atomistic individuals with independent, static preferences to compete in an effort to maximize their own benefits while minimizing their own costs, with little or no regard for the implications for others. In this political form, representation is won through competition among sovereign individuals and majority rule. Because of the assumption of Nature as the source of being, this position can be associated with atheism. However, it is also logically aligned with polytheism, in which there is no predetermined hierarchical order among divine beings.

Moving down into the dynamic state ontologies, the Undifferentiated Relational ontology is aligned with a form of pantheism called expressivism (Taylor 1989), as espoused by the American Transcendentalists. The implication is that the source of being can be represented by any one of its expressions that has an aesthetic appreciation and understanding of all others as the same as itself in some fundamental way. But it assumes sameness in a way that can deny autonomy and uniqueness. As a political form, it is most recognizable in a socialist sovereign state led by interchangeable party members.

The Differentiated Relational ontology is problematic to political organizing because no one or thing has the right to represent the truth, right, or good. This sense of equality leads to some form of anarchism, or what Thayer called "structured nonhierarchical social interaction" (1981, A-38). If it is assumed that all things are equal and mutually impacting, but not connected (the skeptical or fragmented understanding), then the political form of *individualist* anarchism emerges—this would be a postmodern extension of the Differentiated Individual ontology. However, if it is instead assumed that all things are equal and mutually impacting because they are connected (the affirmative or integrated understanding), then the political form of *social* anarchism emerges. This can be linked to panentheism, which imagines divinity as something integral to all beings that connects them (Christ 2003), as well as to Marxist humanism, which imagines all of humanity as sacred (White 1990). This ontological position could be described as a-whole-becoming-through-many. It appears to have the greatest promise for the ideal of democracy because it refutes representation as feasible for dynamic, autonomous individuals, while acknowledging an innate social bond as a foundation for organizing political life.

Given the ontological choices represented in these four ideal-types, the question is, which type of ontology would best help us flourish together?

Which Ontology for the Future?

The purpose of this article is not to argue for one particular answer to this question. This primer on ontology is meant primarily as an invitation to (1) pursue self-reflection and (2) join an ongoing conversation about ontology in public administration. As Taylor suggests, the charge is to take on "the exploration of order through personal resonance" (1989, 511). As scholars and practitioners, we must find the ontology that fits our worldview, consider how it logically relates to political forms, and then sort out the proper role of administration within that political form. Upon so doing, we can firmly declare our ontology and all that it implies (Wamsley 1996). This process of self-reflection and reflexivity has been a well-regarded practice in public administration from humanist organizational theory onward (see, e.g., Forester 1999; Schön 1983).

But it should be noted that this process of understanding ontology also opens up the possibility for critique of both prevailing and alternative ontologies. As noted by Karl Marx, it is during unstable times that revisiting the relationship between the individual and society becomes crucial (Schaff 1970). Using critical social theory (see, e.g., Box 2005) or some other form of ethical analysis (see, e.g., MacIntyre 1988) to assess ontology could have a deep impact on the ways in which we operate in a globalizing world, "where new forms of economic, political, and military colonialism are reshaping both colonizing and colonized societies" (Kincheloe 2006, 181). In so doing, we might move beyond unwitting ontological domination and perhaps even discover the potential of alternative ontologies as better foundations for governance.

For these or similar reasons, many public administration scholars insist that public administration can no longer afford

to unquestioningly accept the philosophical or ontological assumptions of liberal political theory (see, e.g., Box 2008, 2009; Candler and Ventriss 2006; Catlaw 2007a, 2008; Denhardt and Denhardt 2007; Denhardt 1981; Dryzek 1990; Farmer 2005; Forester 1989; Fox and Miller 1995; Hummel 2002; Jun 2002; King and Stivers 1998; King and Zanetti 2005; McSwite 1997, 2005; Stivers 2008; Stout 2010a; Sørensen and Torfing 2005l Thayer 1981; Zanetti 1997). To begin this process of self-reflection and perhaps even critique, the ontological ideal-type model provided herein is designed to help explore beliefs and to make sense of theories and prescriptions for practice that may or may not declare their ontologies. To illustrate, we can consider briefly examples of both types.

General Theories of Public Administration

We can use the characteristics of the ideal-types to uncover the ontological assumptions at play in public administration theories. As described by Robert Denhardt (2000), the original understanding of governance in the United States focused on administration being accountable to the political system hierarchically above it, which maintains a complex set of checks and balances answerable to the citizenry through electoral processes. It was assumed that administration could be made quite scientific in its focus on neutral, efficient implementation of directives handed down from above. Therefore, notions of centralized political authority, hierarchy, administrative answerability, procedural rules, and service to politically set goals permeate orthodox theories.

This style of government synthesizes a combination of static, Individualist ontologies: Differentiated and Undifferentiated. The combined characteristics are shown in table 5. Both are strong ontologies, but they are made to coexist through the separation of church and state—the state is secular and claims a basis in nature, leaving issues of transcendent, metaphysical divinity to religion. The

ontological assumptions of liberalism generate a particular form of political economy, which, as described by Adam Smith, "conceives of order in human associated life as a result of the free interplay of its members' interests" (Ramos 1981, 31). When transactions among self-interested individuals fail to produce the common good, the State must step in to moderate, guide, or control outcomes, mitigating greed and quelling conflict to maintain social order. In this way, government represents what is right and good and must be empowered to limit the bad. Thus, rational actors will voluntarily enter into a social contract with the State to protect their freedoms to the greatest degree possible (Hobbes 1968)—a sort of "lending" of sovereignty that makes a People out of many people. To maintain democratic legitimacy, systems of voluntary representation are used to establish the State. The State then utilizes hierarchical authority to ensure order, while allowing enough competition to ensure sufficient levels of liberty for the pursuit of material gain. Through this theory of social contract, competition demands hierarchy as a solution to its excesses, while hierarchy demands competition as a solution to its own inefficiencies and undemocratic nature (Thayer 1981). Therefore, liberalism moves back and forth between modern and classical conservative positions, blending aspects of both with different emphases across time.

Carried out through public administration, while early forms of modern organization were predominantly hierarchical in nature, contemporary management theory has sought to redesign hierarchies using market strategies such as total quality management and democratic strategies such as participative management and workplace democracy to improve outcomes (Denhardt 2000). Thus, theories of both New Public Management and New Public Administration engage in the liberal moderation of the hierarchical State. However, these two approaches may indeed be based on different ontological ground, as suggested by Evans and Wamsley (1999). New Public Management appears to accept the notion of representation by experts, but while some theories of New Public Administration may also do so, others are based on a desire to engage citizens directly in self-governance. This suggests

Table 5 Modern Western Culture

Ontological Characteristics	Whole Expression Transcendent Source	Plural Expression Immanent Source
Static State	*Undifferentiated Individual*	*Differentiated Individual*
(Type of Individual)	The human being is an imperfect copy of a metaphysical source that is whole and complete	The human being is an independent psychophysical source that is whole and complete—"universe of one"
(Strength of Ontology)	Strong ontology	Strong ontology
(Implications for Representation)	Representation is almost required—someone or something with superior reason must speak for the source of being	Representation is possible because identity is fixed and unchanging—one can know their own and others' interests and speak for them
(Associated Political and Religious Forms)	Classical Conservative Liberalism (republicanism) Monism (king, queen, pope) Statism Monotheism (external divine being/source of being)	Modern Liberalism Individualist Anarchism Atheism (natural being) Polytheism (being is divine but embodied)

Table 6 Alternative Ontologies

Ontological Characteristics	Whole Expression Transcendent Source	Plural Expression Immanent Source
Dynamic State	*Undifferentiated Relational*	*Differentiated Relational*
(Type of Individual)	The human being is a holographic expression of a metaphysical source	The human being is a unique expression of a complex, relational, multidimensional source
(Strength of Ontology)	Strong ontology	Weak ontology
(Implications for Representation)	Representation is possible because individuals are interchangeable expressions of the whole	Representation is not possible because of an ever-changing identity and mutual influences
(Associated Political and Religious Forms)	Socialism/Collectivism Pantheism (all are parts of the divine being/ source of being)	Social Anarchism Humanism (humanity is sacred) Panentheism (all beings are divine and embodied)

an attempt to incorporate some elements of the Differentiated Relational position.

Alternative Ontological Declarations

Some scholars who do not accept the assumptions of the prevailing political ontology actively declare alternative ontological positions. They agree that "the challenge that commands attention for public administration is to begin conceiving the social relations and subsequently governing structures and practices that are rooted in a different political ontology" (Catlaw 2005, 471). However, this challenge leaves us with the project of identifying *which* alternative ontology to work from. Table 6 provides a collapsed overview of these types.

Many of these characteristics can be found in current dialogue in the public administration literature. Catlaw suggests that we start with refusal, a rejection of the [any] ontology of representation and sets forth propositions that would create an ontology for "a politics of the subject" (2007a, 192–99): (1) neither unity nor atomism are acceptable; (2) radical difference must be accommodated within dynamic compositions; (3) becoming occurs through generative, situational processes; (4) governing is a process that cuts across human activity; (5) governing does not entail permanent social roles; and (6) governing focuses on facilitating the process. These characteristics imply a weak ontology that does not have hierarchical positions or any type of unity but is not atomistic either. It also suggests a dynamic state of being that supports ongoing change but does not allow representation through social roles. This is most similar to the Differentiated Relational type.

A conference panel at the 1999 American Political Science Association and a follow-up journal symposium in *Administration & Society* focused primarily on the political theory of Hannah Arendt and the ontology of Martin Heidegger (Farmer 2002). These essays make problematic the prevailing individualistic ontology, which imagines each human being as fundamentally separate from everything and everyone else (Hummel 2002), as well as the notion of representation of either a political or expert nature (Stivers 2002b). If we are isolated individuals who must create social space before any type of political relation is possible, how do we create social space? If we are worlds unto ourselves, how can anyone represent another? Farmer suggests that the solutions lie in changing our consciousness and our "understanding of self, others, and nature" (2002b, 125). Hummel suggests that the answers lie in understanding ourselves as "always in a social and physical context, in which our presence and its context are an inseparable whole" (2002, 103). Stivers (2008) takes up this point by suggesting that the political forms recommended by Arendt and Follett are based on an ontology described by Heidegger (1996), who offers a non-Cartesian view of reality in which being is experienced always in association with the world and others. In fact, all of existence is in a state of Being-with, without separation and without a transcendent source. This explanation reflects aspects of the Differentiated Relational ontology, but without indicating a dynamic nature.

Howe (2006) asserts that the neutral, scientific ontology of liberalism leaves much to be desired as a basis for a public ethic—there is neither intrinsic meaning nor transcendent purpose. Nor is there a sense of human connection. He provides a compelling argument for considering the enchanted materialism that Bennett (2001) bor-rows from the ancient Greek Epicureans as an alternative basis for a nonrationalist ethic for public administration. He suggests that if we hold an aesthetic appreciation of all of existence, we will make better judgments about collective action. This ideal combines elements of the Differentiated Individual and Undifferentiated Relational types.

To offer another view on the question of an alternative ontology for the future, if we accept White's (2000) premise that weak ontologies provide a better foundation for the twenty-first century—a dynamic, globalizing, pluralistic context that has become deeply fragmented and competitive and in which claims to truth and legitimacy are regularly contested—then we must discount ontologies which claim either a firm Whole or a static Is, which eliminates all but one ideal-type: the Differentiated Relational ontology.

More pragmatically, we might consider the words of two former U.S. presidents. McSwite recalls the words of John F. Kennedy: "'We should remember we all must live on this one small planet, we all care about our children's future, and we are all mortal.' With these words, Kennedy sought to strike an appeal to the universal human connection" (2006, 187). Espousing similar sentiments nearly 50 years later, Bill Clinton said,

> To me, the most important finding that came out of the sequencing of the human genome is that we are all 99.9% the same . . . Does that mean that identity is not important? No . . . But it means that in an interdependent world where you can't stop the world, you can't get off, and you can't escape each other, the only way to celebrate what is unique about your life is to recognize that what we have in common matters more. If the world can come to that recognition, we're gonna be fine . . . our common humanity matters more. (2010)

This suggests that a worldview that accommodates both connectedness and individuality is the key to success, or at least sustainability, for humankind.

Thus, a reasonable choice would be to seek an ontological understanding and commitment to a notion of life as an ongoing process of becoming among interdependent beings, each of which is a unique expression of existence. This reflects the Differentiated Relational ontological position, in which we are a dynamic, mutually influencing multitude of unique but related individual parts co-creating a whole. Such an ontology provides a logically coherent basis for practices that include all concerned individuals, allowing for equal mutual influence and change in an ongoing political process.

Working forward toward political form, this sounds quite a bit like the political and administrative philosophies of Hannah Arendt and Mary Parker Follett (Stivers 2008, 2002b; Stout and Staton 2011; Stout 2010a), or what has been called the collaborative tradition of public administration (Stout 2006, 2007, 2009a, 2009b). Practices for collaboration with *citizens* (Vigoda 2002) include citizen governance (Box 1998), deliberative democracy (Dryzek 1990; Fischer 2003; Forester 1999; Fox and Miller 1995; Roberts 2004), substantive democracy, (Box et al. 2001), participatory policy making (deLeon 1992; Dryzek and Torgerson 1993; Fischer and Forester 1993; King, Feltey, and Susel 1998; Ventriss 1985; Walters, Aydelotte, and Miller 2000;), and coproduction in implementa-

tion (King and Zanetti 2005; Sharp 1980; Whitaker 1980). All of these ideas assume the capacity for people to work together in self-governance. However, this article is not intended to fully explain such approaches or defend this ontological choice—that must be left to other writings.

Conclusions

Further discussion, explication, and affirmation of alternative ontologies are important because, while science and liberalism have freed us from the domination of religions and royalty, they have created a new strong ontology that produces less than optimal social outcomes. Postmodern critique has provided us with clear warnings against such foundationalism and essentialism, but it does so at the expense of effective social criticism (Fraser and Nicholson 1988)—it eliminates the notion of a constitutive good and therefore any basis for normative affirmations. Indeed, it has served to fragment the identity assumed by Differentiated Individualism even further, thereby exacerbating problems of social disconnection (Love 2010; Stout 2010a). It disallows the notion of a reality beyond that which can be apprehended through the human mind and denies that which is not social construction. The key to refusing the prevailing ontology is in pairing deconstruction with pragmatic affirmation that is tentative and open to change. This primer is an invitation toward that end and the ideal-type model is a possible tool for beginning analysis.

Notes

1. This brings to mind the Eastern philosophical understanding of the Tao (way of life) as a whole divided into two opposing forces, Yin and Yang, each with the seed of the other within, which generates an ever-changing transformation in pursuit of balance (Capra 1999). This idea of being as process was carried forward by Hegel (1977) in his philosophy of dialectical becoming and, in part, by Heidegger (1996) in his philosophy of being.

2. Labeling the political philosophy associated with the ontological positions is difficult because differences that are important to some get lost. For example, those who hold to a classical republican philosophy may reject being grouped with classical conservative liberalism. I do so based on Clark (1998) and MacIntyre (1988).

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