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# The Wickedness of Rittel and Webber's Dilemmas

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## Abstract

Rittel and Webber connected their notion of “wicked problems” to three fundamental planning dilemmas. Many approaches within public administration theory have explicitly addressed wicked problems yet hardly paid attention to the dilemmas. We revisit the planning dilemmas to find out their potential relevance for current administration theory and practice. We argue that the dilemmas evolve out of the current institutional setup, meaning that wicked problems cannot be resolved by better administrative frameworks or methods. Rather societal matters are to be included in decision-making, for instance, by seeing societal opposition as opportunities to learn to deal with the planning dilemmas.

## Keywords

wicked problems, dilemmas, plurality, normativity

## Introduction

The article *Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning*, in which Rittel and Webber (1973) introduced the notion of “wicked problems,” has become a modern classic. A Google Scholar search quickly reveals that it has been

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referred to more than 15,000 times. What is also striking is that, in spite of its age, the article's relevance has not withered away. On the contrary, Crowley and Head (2017) counted 10,000 references only 3 years ago.

In their paper, Rittel and Webber argue that the societal problems of their days were problems that could be called "wicked," in the sense that these problems were ill-defined and could never be solved. Rather, they could only be "re-solved," because of the irreducible complexity and the normativity that is intrinsic to the formulation and the resolution of such problems (cf. Farrell & Hooker, 2013). Decision-makers may seek to cope with wicked problems, but as Rittel and Webber stress in the final paragraph of their paper, they can never overcome three fundamental planning dilemmas. First, there is no way to come to consensus about what is *the* societal good. Second, the wickedness of problems is an intrinsic quality; it cannot be taken away by developing better-suited approaches of planning. Third is the rising emancipatory demand for equality conflict with the presence of societal pluralism (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 169).

Although the title of the original article indicates the prominence of these dilemmas, it is both interesting and puzzling to see that *none* of the papers we have read (admittedly, we have not checked them all) explicitly refers to these three dilemmas of planning. With this observation in mind, we will be the next to revisit Rittel and Webber's paper (for other examples, see Coyne, 2005; Daviter, 2017; Head, 2019; McConnell, 2018; Peters, 2017) and focus on the inescapability of the three dilemmas of planning, trying to explore the way these dilemmas play out in the context of policy and administration. Here, we will regard administration as the institutional setup that allows societal problems to be addressed—the organizations, institutions, and structures that are involved in the process of identifying, defining, and proposing solutions to societal problems (cf. Dahl & Lindblom, 1963; Waldo, 2006; Wamsley & Zald, 1973).

One of our key arguments is that the planning dilemmas of Rittel and Webber evolve out of this institutional setup, and as such wicked problems cannot be resolved by developing better administrative frameworks or methods. In this, it is important to emphasize that while society itself may change, the institutional setup remains largely intact. At their core, the planning dilemmas seem to revolve around the interplay between a changing society and a fixed administrative apparatus. This implies that the tendency to look at internal administrative processes needs to be overcome to understand how the planning dilemmas can be coped with. As such, we will not focus purely on administrative concerns in our paper, but zoom out and look at societal developments from a broader perspective.

The structure of the article is as follows. We will consider the interpretation of societal problems and planning approaches as forwarded by Rittel and Webber in 1973 in the next section. After that, we will sketch out some of the dominant trends of policy-making and administrative theory, which can be seen as ways to deal with wicked problems. Subsequently, we will explore how current society is fragmented, demanding administrative theory to develop new ways to address the planning dilemmas. In the concluding section, we will reiterate the value of Rittel and Webber's paper for administration theory and practice, most notably by addressing the way in which the acknowledgment of their dilemmas helps administration to learn from societal opposition.

## **The Problems of Rittel and Webber**

In their paper, Rittel and Webber consider two models of planning. The first is a model in which experts address the problems of society by diagnosing these problems and by forwarding their solutions. Rittel and Webber position the origin of this planning model in the 19th century industrial age and characterize it as a model in which experts apply their knowledge in an engineering manner to create solutions for society.

With this planning approach, professionals typically conceive of any policy problem as a "tame problem"—problems with well-defined goals, descriptions, and rules—turning all problems into puzzles that can be solved via established knowledge and deductive reasoning. Rittel and Webber use the metaphor of the chess game to illustrate the character of such tame problems—a game that has been identified by many, most notably Herbert Simon, as the epitaph of human ingenuity (Ensmenger, 2012).

However, planning problems cannot always be easily approached as if they were chess problems: first, because there is no consensus about both problem definitions and solutions to these problems when society harbors groups with different normative outlooks; second, one may not always have the right oversight regarding the efficacy of planning. In many cases, solutions create consequences that may have been unintended, but which could be very serious. The environmental problems that became manifest in the 1960s may be the most striking example of such unintended consequences.

To deal with societal problems that could not be "tamed"—Rittel and Webber are not so explicit about what these problems were—the first planning model was not suited. Society had evolved toward pluralism, meaning that different societal groups advanced different values and could therefore understand societal problems differently. Moreover, concerns emerged about the unintended consequences of solutions to societal problems, such as the

fairness of the distribution of these consequences, or about their impact on the environment.

According to Rittel and Webber, the awareness among planners of these intractable problems gave rise to an alternative planning model that only exists in an idealized form and in which professionals of all sorts—from social workers to highway engineers—analyze societal problems and possible solutions within their broader technical and social contexts. This “systems-based” model of planning emerged after World War II and was aimed at identifying the causes of societal problems within the broader sociotechnical system of society. Moreover, it served the goal of assessing possible solutions by more societal values than just efficiency, and not only in terms of inputs but also by their outputs for managing the consequences these solutions may have. Rittel and Webber express their doubts about the effectiveness and the desirability of this second model of planning. They observed that society rejected the solutions this system-based planning amounted to, leading to a loss of confidence in planning among professionals and a call to analyze where it fails.

In short, both models fall short of dealing with problems that can be characterized by the following 10 features of wickedness:

1. There is no definite formulation of wicked problems;
2. Wicked problems have no stopping rule;
3. Solutions to wicked problems are not true or false, but good or bad;
4. There is no immediate or ultimate test for solutions;
5. All attempts to solutions have effects that may not be reversible;
6. Wicked problems have no clear solution, and perhaps not even a set of possible solutions;
7. Every wicked problem is essentially unique;
8. Every wicked problem may be a symptom of another problem;
9. There are multiple explanations for the wicked problem;
10. The planner (or policy-maker) has no right to be wrong.

These features are well known. Yet, the analysis of Rittel and Webber may be better condensed in terms of their three planning dilemmas, because these are more fundamental, encompassing, and profound. The first of these dilemmas is that there can be no theory on the societal good that is accepted by the whole of society. Second, the wickedness of problems that are characterized in terms of their 10 characteristics is an intrinsic quality, that is, it cannot be taken away by developing better-suited planning approaches. Third, there is an irrefutable tension between societal pluralism and the emancipatory pursuits for equality.

## Dealing With Wickedness in Policy

### *Challenging the Planning Paradigm*

Rittel and Webber's article can be seen as one of the texts that successfully challenged the belief in omnipotent planning. Around the same time notions such as the "garbage can model" (Cohen et al., 1972) and "muddling through" (Lindblom, 1959, 1979) became popular. Similarly, Wildavsky (1973) claimed that "if planning is everything, maybe it's nothing," and Rein and Schön's (1977) account of "framing" stressed the fact that problem definitions are always subjected to interpretation and hence can never be taken as objective and incontestable.

There are two points of a certain irony here. First, despite these critiques of planning, the institutional apparatus that has been developed to resolve societal problems is largely unchanged. The foundational structure of this apparatus was laid down before World War II and got its definite shape in the postwar era. In this, one may recognize Weberian processes of rationalization, meaning that expertise and authority were very much separated over numerous jurisdictions. The value-laden nature of societal problems seems to have been delegated to the sphere of politics, while the management of these problems was deferred to administrative bodies that were conceived as value neutral (cf. Rutgers & Schreurs, 2006; Simon, 1997; Weber, 1972). Adjustments in the practices of planning and policy-making appear to be mainly pursued *within* this existing apparatus. Inevitably, this creates tensions: How can practices change while institutions are left intact?

The second irony here is that while wicked problems have come to form a key notion in fields such as public administration theory and policy studies, the planning doctrines described by Rittel and Webber have become hard to grasp, making the article an arcane read at times. Nowadays, hardly any scholar of government talks about planning, instead terms such as "policy" or "design" are used. In a similar vein, the first of the two models described by Rittel and Webber is generally taken as a straw man that portrays a way of technocratic and top-down decision-making based on an exclusivist application of expert knowledge. What is also striking is that references to their second systems-based model, which Rittel and Webber call a "cybernetic model," seem to be completely absent in literature on wicked problems. By implication, the warnings that accompanied this second model also appear to have become oblivious. What emerges is an impression that "wicked problems" figure as a background that allows for the development of all kinds of policy approaches that are capable of "coping, taming or solving" problems that only loosely relate to Rittel and Webber's characterization of wickedness (cf. Daviter, 2017).

## *Addressing Wickedness: Complexity, Managerialism, Involvement, and Experimentation*

As said above, approaches to policy-making and planning have been adjusted within the existing institutional structures of resolving societal problems. Without having the pretense to be exhaustive, we will characterize some of these adjustments, which can be seen as reactions to the acknowledgment of some sort of wickedness of societal problems.

First, there is a strong tendency in administration theory to reduce wicked problems to *complexity*, while simultaneously seeing any complex problem as *wicked*. Following this scope, a variety of tools have been developed that aim to cope with this complexity by proposing “how-to-do” action strategies (Termeer et al., 2015). Such strategies follow the normative imperative that wicked problems *must* be solved (Peters, 2017). In itself, complexity often appears to be understood via the involvement of heterogeneous networks that increase the number of problem definitions that are at play, which has a severe impact on the number and character of the uncertainties that have to be taken into account (Van Bueren et al., 2003). The dominant approach that evolves from this account is to deal with a plurality of actors, institutions and problem definitions, aligning with a discourse that is characterized by metaphors such as “learning” (Grin & Loeber, 2007; Hall, 1993; Sabatier, 1988), “puzzling” (Heclo, 1975), and “games” (Scharpf, 1997). Ironically, these were metaphors already criticized in Rittel and Webber’s article.

The second trend concerns the uptake of market-based approaches to solve societal problems. Traditionally, the unitary state can be seen as the natural locus of planning practices, hosting public organizations that pursued the management of societal problems. This allowed for a centralized, seemingly rational, coherent process of policy formulation and implementation. With the withering of the era of planning, the market has increasingly come to be seen as the alternative institutional locus better suited to cater to the needs of wicked problems. This not only led to the privatization of public services but also to the introduction of managerial ideas in the public sector (Hood, 1995; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). The underlying motivation is that the market, as a realm that follows evolutionary mechanisms, is presumably much more *adaptive* to new situations and challenges than the workings of state bureaucracy (Schumpeter, 2000; Van Gunsteren, 1994). We do not mean to suggest that the market has simply replaced the state. We rather think that, in line with the admittedly overused label of “neo-liberalism,” the general belief in the problem-solving capacities of centralized planners have given way to the belief that the aggregate of individual consumers will make the most efficient choices (Aalbers, 2013). Related to such managerial approaches

is the emphasis on new leadership roles, which can be seen as an attempt to overcome the inflexibility associated with public institutions. Leadership is often considered to be able to overcome the stronghold of structures, allowing for transformation and adaptive strategies (Head & Alford, 2015).

Third, we may recognize the attempts to *involve* members of the public or publics to contribute to policy decisions (Bohman, 1998; Dryzek, 1994; Fischer, 1999; Renn et al., 1993), which had spin-offs with notions like coproduction, cocreation, deliberative planning, participatory planning, etc. (Rowe & Frewer, 2000). Added to these ideas about public involvement, there is an increasing emphasis on the conditional nature of expertise knowledge, pointing toward the intrinsic uncertainties of science-based knowledge (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1990; Pellizzoni, 2003) as well as its political character (Jasanoff, 1997).

Fourth, the implementation of new policies is frequently seen as *experiments*, stressing the conditional and open-ended character of new policy arrangements. In the area of digital products, it is nothing less than customary to release unfinished products into the market. The feedback of users is expected to allow for the continuous adjustment and improvement of the product, now giving rise to the “permanence of beta,” ever postponing the introduction of a final product (Neff & Stark, 2004). This role of beta versions appears to have spilled over into the policy domain, first in the context of digital policies themselves (Ballon et al., 2005), later also in the context of other policy fields (cf. Jackson et al., 2014; Marres, 2017). Today notions such as “experiments,” “living labs,” “pilots,” “testbeds,” and so on have become ubiquitous in the policy domain (e.g., Duit & Löf, 2018; Rossini & Bozeman, 1977).

## Intangible Society

Rittel and Webber presented their analysis against the background of societal distrust during the 1960s, which could be straightforwardly connected to societal factions that felt disenfranchised. While today we may see recurrent manifestations of discontent, it can be safely added that contemporary society is unmatched with regards to its level of plurality regarding normative and political outlooks. At the same time—and this is substantially different than in previous decades—these societal factions are not stable. Individuals take on different roles, having no trouble going from satisfied consumer to angry protestor. Instead of being represented by a certain organization or feeling like a member of a certain class, they take part in a heterogeneous and fluid network of coalitions and movements (Castells, 2015). Here, digital media play a major role in facilitating and organizing such

coalitions (cf. Pesch et al., 2019). Similarly relevant are developments that relate to globalization, which have a big impact on the moral and political orientations creating new socioeconomic interdependencies (also see Bauman, 2000; Fraser, 2007; Giddens, 2002).

Public reactions may be fierce, as could be seen in the case of the so-called “yellow vests” (Grossman, 2019), which involved the massive protests in France following the government’s decision to enact a tax advantage for diesel fuel in November 2018. These demonstrations not only spilled over to other European countries; they can also be seen as symbolic of protests against other policy decisions and expert-based knowledge claims, which are considered to be elitist, by at least some of the protestors. This may bring to mind notions such as climate skepticism (Copland, 2019), as well as antivaccination activism (Chiou & Tucker, 2018). Added to that are many conspiracy theories that are spread over the internet contesting dominant accounts of events.

Indeed, the internet can be said to function as an “echo chamber” for dissenting voices that clamor down the silent majority, but do get a lot of traction in traditional media and the political realm. This is considered to give rise to societal polarization, in which two extreme positions are given almost all attention in public debates (Sunstein, 2007). In this, authoritative elites are treated as intrinsically suspect (no matter whether they have a political, economic, or scientific status), with expert knowledge forming a convenient target as the echo chamber of the internet provides ample opportunity to find opposing claims.

Having said that, societal manifestations of discontent are very much intangible. As social movements have no permanent organizational structure, they may disappear just as suddenly as they have surfaced (Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2018). Moreover, representative spokespersons are usually missing, so reaching out to these groups is essentially impossible. This evasiveness is underlined by surveys revealing that experts are still trusted, and the functioning of the internet as an echo chamber is disputed, precisely because the lack of permanence of extreme positions that are advocated (Dubois & Blank, 2018; Krause et al., 2019). The relevance of these developments is further underlined by the fact that minor electoral differences can bring about major political shifts—a point illustrated by the British Brexit-referendum or presidency of Donald Trump. The consequences of pluralism and polarization appear to be more acute than before.

## Revisiting the Planning Dilemmas

In this section, we will try to identify what kind of responses may be distilled from administrative theory and practice regarding the planning dilemmas,

especially taking considering that the conditions that led to these dilemmas have only gained traction in contemporary societies.

### *Dilemma 1: No Encompassing Conception of the Societal Good*

To start with, we will address the impossibility of having an overarching consensus about the “societal good.” This dilemma is especially profound for administration, as its centralized institutional structures assume a singular take on societal problems and solutions. In others words, it is presupposed that societal problems and solutions can be articulated as distinct and coherent phenomena. This suggests that an operational conception of a societal good needs to be constructed to initiate administrative activities. If we refer to the encompassing societal good with quotations marks, we can say that the societal “good” needs to be articulated in terms of societal goods. One may retrieve three starting points for doing so, giving rise to different outlooks toward the workings of administration (cf. Schubert, 1960). These starting points are as follows:

1. There is no such thing as a collective good;
2. This good is the outcome of negotiations between advocates for different conceptions of what is good;
3. There is some independent conception of a societal good that can be shared by the social collective.

The idea that there is no such thing as a shared societal good motivates the market-based approaches that have been presented above. In such approaches, there are no shared preferences; individuals may choose for themselves what good is worth pursuing. This idea, however, postulates that we establish conceptions of the “good” *before* we are members of a certain society, which denies our essence as social beings (Pesch, 2020; Sandel, 1998). In other words, though there may be no societal “good” that is genuinely shared by the whole of society, the *idea* that there is such a good motivates our choices and preferences (Taylor, 2002).

The second starting point is that of the “pluralist” account in which societal goods are the outcome of the conflicts between political and societal factions that have different conceptions of the societal “good.” This is a classical account in political science, in which politics is seen as the domain of opposing viewpoints and interests that need to be traded off by negotiation, voting, and bargaining (e.g., Dahl, 1967; Huitema et al., 2007). Arguably, this position is closest to that of Rittel and Webber themselves, and as such the dilemma they observe is directly applicable to this account.

These two approaches assume that there is no conception of a societal good that exists independently of concrete advocates for certain positions. There are also more “idealistic” positions of which many assume a transcending version of the societal “good” (Benn & Gaus, 1983; Pesch, 2005). In the context of administration theory, it is interesting to look at those scholars who have tried to find encompassing and coherent sets of values that are typical for public administration. These values are considered to transcend partial accounts of the collective good and as such they could inform practitioners from public administration about how to engage with their work in a way that serves the “good” of the societal whole (cf. Frederickson, 1976; Rohr, 1990; Wamsley et al., 1984). The search for such sets of values is substantiated by finding out what sets public administration apart from private administration (Allison, 1980; Pesch, 2008b; Rainey et al., 1976; Van der Wal et al., 2008), or the domain of politics from the domain of administration (Rutgers, 2001; Svava, 1999). One may say that this outlook may assume a singular conception of the societal “good,” but tries to make it workable by applying this conception to the constrained societal setting of administration, instead of society as a whole.

To a certain extent, societal protests can be seen as reactions to the first two approaches to operationalize the societal “good” in terms of societal goods. First, these protests target the way in which current policy arrangements reproduce a consumerist outlook, while not having the opportunity to raise broader questions about societal justice (Fraser, 2014). Second, they point toward the experienced inability to play a part in the negotiations that give rise to collective arrangements such as laws and policies. While the third approach maintains a version of an undivided collective “good,” it cannot resolve the fundamental question whose or what conception of the societal good can be accepted as the “good” that is served by administrative activities. In the other dilemmas introduced by Rittel and Webber, these issues play out even more clearly.

### *Dilemma 2: There Is No Way to Overcome the Wickedness of Policy Problems*

The second dilemma of Rittel and Webber deals with the claim that we have no theory “to dispel wickedness.” Also here, market-based solutions prove to be insufficient (Durant & Legge, 2006), for instance because contract-based provision of goods and services *reduces* the flexibility of governments to react to wicked problems (Head & Alford, 2015). Furthermore, the policy approaches that are formulated as effective responses to wicked problems do not seem to provide a way out of this dilemma. This can be illustrated by

looking at their emphasis on developing piecemeal approaches to overcome the complexity and conditionality that are intrinsic to wicked problems (cf. Termeer et al., 2015).

As any strategy to wicked problem can only be seen as a partial and conditional solution, the pursuit of encompassing and far-reaching solutions has become suspect. On one hand, this leads to the compartmentalization of problems into smaller problems, which are addressed by different administrative units. On themselves, these smaller problems may be more manageable, but this partitioning gives rise to problems of intraorganizational coordination (Oomsels et al., 2019). However, this has given rise to incremental solutions in which problems are addressed by taking one step at the time. A first problem is that there are societal problems that cannot be addressed by incremental solutions only—instead they demand resolute governmental action (cf. McConnell & 't Hart, 2019). Most conspicuously, the problem of global warming asks for drastic measures, despite its fundamental wickedness (Ney & Verweij, 2015). Second, incrementalism does not imply irreversibility: Any decision will create new institutional interdependencies or raise expectations among actors that cannot become undone (cf. Bergen, 2016). In other words, incremental solutions can also give rise to “lock-ins” that cannot be foreseen or restored.

In the same vein, solutions that are implemented within an experimental setting create interdependencies, and moreover have real-life consequences for those affected. This brings us to the third problem: That the experimental approach to policy-making conveniently allows policy-makers to avert responsibility. To emphasize this point, it makes sense to use a more lengthy quotation by Rittel and Webber themselves:

in the world of planning and wicked problems [no immunity of those who postulate hypotheses] is tolerated. Here the aim is not to find the truth, but to improve some characteristics of the world where people live. Planners are liable for the consequences of the actions they generate; the effect can matter a great deal to those people that are touched by those actions. (p. 167)

These words not only reveal that experimental approaches need to take account of responsibilities but also form a strong contrast with the absence of normative language within policy discourses. It seems that moral issues are, at least implicitly, delegated to the realms of society or politics, neglecting the intrinsic normative qualities of policy-making. However, and this is a central point of Rittel and Webber, any policy has distributive implications. The developers of policies have to bear responsibility for these implications.

### *Dilemma 3: Equity Versus Societal Plurality*

This brings us to the third dilemma, which holds that there is no theory that resolves the problems of equity provoked by rising pluralism. This dilemma is publicly displayed in the unprecedented extent to which society calls for equity and fairness, not only as individuals per se but also as disfranchised groups. Social justice can be seen as a key theme in current societal discourse (Baier, 1987; Fraser, 2000; Sen, 2011). Moreover, justice claims adhere to different dimensions and are frequently in direct opposition with each other (Pesch et al., 2017). So while justice has come to feature as the key moral goal in contemporary society, it has also become the most contested moral topic (Allen, 1999). The concern for justice is particularly manifest in the way that people perceive themselves to be excluded, both as individuals and as societal groups. In a situation that is characterized by plurality, it is hard to conceive of policy measures (or lack thereof) that will not exclude or negatively affect a certain group.

In response to these contrastive and sometimes paradoxical demands for justice, policy-makers do have to make choices that are not agreeable with at least some societal factions. In extension, it can no longer be assumed that there is a homogeneous set of human needs that need to be served, nor that a singular set of values or conception of the collective good can guide administrators in their daily activities. Inevitably, public functionaries will have to face discontent and opposing views regarding what the desirable and acceptable measures and decisions should be. To a large extent, the protests outlined above are instigated by the very fact that political and administrative measures will be cherished by some and loathed by others.

### **Learning From Dilemmas**

It can be said that the notion of wicked problems has come to live a life of its own, only partially related to the text by Rittel and Webber from which it emerged. Although some parts of their paper have become quite an impenetrable read, it nevertheless pays off to have a closer look at these parts given contemporary forms of societal discontent. The fundamental question is: How can the effectiveness and legitimacy of administrative arrangements and activities be ensured when these inevitably encounter societal resistance?

Public administration theory appears to have some difficulty with addressing this question. First, this is because of the separation between administration and society that is implicitly maintained. There is theoretical discussion about the status of public administration as something distinct from private

administration or from politics, but how public administration relates to society itself seems to be an area of study that is largely neglected. Second, and in relation to the first point, there is little research into the moral nature of public administration, apart from the value-laden aspects of the work of individual administrators, such as the functioning of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010; Moore, 1987).

The takeaway is that public organizations do not only pursue and enable values that are important for society but also embody and reproduce certain values. They are not a “mere” tool for solving societal problems, but are part of both the solution and the problem. It would be helpful for public administration theory to develop a discourse that caters much more explicitly to these political and normative components of administrative practice, so as to allow for a better grip on its intrinsic complexities and sheer wickedness. These points are taken up, for instance by Heidelberg (2017, 2019), who studies the way administration is embedded within wider democratic structures.

It is not just important to attend to the intrinsic moral quality of administration, but also to underline the need to take the normative diversity of society into account (cf. de Graaf, 2015). As it is impossible to develop theories of societal goodness or an equity that is acceptable to everyone, policy decisions and administrative activities will always displease certain groups. While this displeasing seems to be unavoidable, most policy approaches appear to put emphasis on articulating solutions to societal problems that are flexible and inclusive. This emphasis may be laudable and useful for societal acceptance but goes at the expense of the attention to societal conflict, as well as the moral repercussions of policy-making (cf. Cuppen, 2018; Pesch, 2008a). It would be sensible to see social protests as a form of “social learning,” in the sense that such protests forward societal assessments about certain public decisions (Verloo, 2015).

The three dilemmas of Rittel and Webber may provide guidance by allowing policy-makers and administrators to *understand* societal responses toward their policies and decisions. The essence of a dilemma is that it reveals two social goals that cannot be satisfied at the same time (Nieuwenburg, 2004). Opposition and protest articulate the lasting presence of alternative goals and value sets. They are the ways in which citizens can demand the reconsideration of existing prioritizations of goals and values.

In responding to such societal protest, administrators may ask themselves which conception of the societal good motivates their decisions and outlooks, followed by a questioning of the extent to which such societal reactions can be seen as contesting these conceptions. This means that expressions of discontent should be acknowledged and seen as legitimate efforts to show the presence of alternative conceptions of the societal good.

Second, the wickedness of wicked problems should be taken seriously. Approaches developed in theory and practice may have been successful in dealing with a selection of the 10 characteristics of wicked problems, but never with all of them. Indeed, it is not the goal to solve these problems, but to *accept* their existence. In this paper, we have analyzed public administration as the way in which modern societies have organized solutions to collective problems. This structure is left largely intact, whereas the acknowledgment of wickedness points us toward that fact that solutions and problems cannot be separated. Hence, public administration is not just part of the solution but also part of the problem, turning it into an intrinsically moral phenomenon. It also means that the only things we can foresee are unforeseen effects. We need frameworks and methods that allow theorists and practitioners to understand the inevitability of these features, instead of having methods that suggest they can be reasoned away.

The third dilemma concerns the fundamental plurality of society, which is manifested in contrastive conceptions of justice. This means that there are no decisions that will satisfy everyone. Any solution, measure, or activity will give rise to disappointment. Administrators need to assume responsibility for the fact that their decisions will not be seen as fair by all. Societal opposition should not be conflated with public distrust, but as an expression of public concern and civic involvement. In fact, distrust will emerge only *after* the value and legitimacy of societal opposition are contested (Ashforth, 1992). As such, opposition should be embraced as an occasion to discuss, defend and if necessary renegotiate administrative decisions.

These findings suggest that special attention needs to be given to the moral responsibility of administrators. The existing institutional apparatus has been designed upon the basis of clearly distinguished *functional* responsibilities of those involved in politics and administration. However, our analysis of the dilemmas of Rittel and Webber emphasizes that all decisions enforced by administrators have moral repercussions, even if these decisions pertain to the implementation of laws and policies that have been determined elsewhere (Bovens, 1998). Moreover, with the persistence of societal plurality, these decisions will displease at least some members of society. It is important that administrators acknowledge these aspects of their activities, not out of moral obligation, but because we believe that recognizing the wickedness of administration will give rise to decisions that are accepted as more legitimate and trustworthy.

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