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Neutrality or phronetic skills:
A paradox in the praxis of citizen dialogues organized by municipal administration

ABSTRACT: Citizen dialogues (*medborgardialoger*) are in Sweden normally organized by officials (or consultants) working in the municipal administration. Such dialogues are in Sweden developed by the authorities with starting point in legislated counseling meetings in city planning processes and developed as a way to deepen or resurrect the democratic system. In this article I will contrast this state of affairs with what is less spoken of, and less valued, in modern bureaucracy: phronetic knowledge (Aristotle). Phronesis points toward the capacity to deal with specific situations in their specific context, situations where rules and general knowledge does not help us all the way, but where a personal judgement is needed. The tension between phronesis and ideals of neutrality is present in city planning and political philosophy, which are exemplified by the thoughts of Paul and Linda Davidoff, Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber, Chantal Mouffe or Hannah Arendt.

KEYWORDS: Practical knowledge, citizen dialogues, phronesis, modern bureaucracy, Hannah Arendt, Aristotle, Max Weber

Introduction

During the 21th century citizen dialogues (*medborgardialoger*) has become an increasingly important tool for Swedish municipal administrations in order to improve the contact with the citizens. Such dialogues are in Sweden developed by the authorities with starting point in legislated counseling meetings in city planning processes and developed as a way to deepen, or even resurrect, the democratic system. When less and less engage in party politics and the representative democratic system, it becomes important to develop new

channels for communication between the authorities and the citizens. Both politicians and officials experience a need to encourage engagement from the citizens, not least in order too keep the social contract functioning, and to develop social sustainability.

One problem that this quite new praxis has given awareness of is that the municipal officials, in for example city planning, not are educated for working tasks based on social interaction. They are educated as experts in their area, mostly with focus upon a technical knowledge. They also work within organizations with a bureaucratic ideal of non-personal relations and a calculating rationality. Nevertheless, many officials are wise individuals with social skills – for which I will here use the term phronesis – and might therefore organize good dialogues. But these skills are present *despite* the education they have and the organization they work within, not because of them. These skills can be understood as a kind of practical knowledge, which is present in many professions and developed through experience, but which often remains silent, or silenced, on both an administrative and a theoretical level.

We also live in a society with a high tempo focused upon efficiency. To work in city planning leaves little space for deeper reflection on the working situation and the tasks one is asked to perform. In an experimental course that I organized for staff working on citizen dialogues on a municipal level we tried to improve this situation. The course was part of the research project DECODE – Community Design for Conflicting Desires, and the research method applied is invented at The Centre for Studies in Practical Knowledge at Södertörn University, Sweden, and aims at developing knowledge about professions through a close collaboration between researcher and practitioners.[1] In this collaboration the practitioners write texts based on their experiences under the supervision of the researcher (in this case me). Through combining real-life stories, from the participant's experience of working life, with theoretical perspectives on the subject presented by the researcher, we together create a room for reflections on phronetic knowledge, in this course with focus on citizen dialogues. The texts written during such courses are often published in anthologies, edited by the researcher and including also ar-

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[1] Learn more on the research project Decode, sponsored by Vinnova – Swedens innovation agency, at http://www.decodeprojektet.se. The course participants were all connected to either this research-project or to Upplands Väsby, a municipal north of Stockholm. More information on The Centre for Studies in Practical Knowledge can be found here: http://www.sh.se/p3/ext/content.nsf/aget?openagent&key=about_us_1301926162249.

ticles by researchers that reflect upon the texts written by the practitioners. In this case the texts were published in *Medborgardialog – om det svåra i att mötas. Praktikers reflektioner om ett av demokratins viktigaste verktyg* (2016) (which could be translated to „Citizen dialogues – on the difficulty to meet. Practitioner's reflections on one of democracy's most important tools") edited by me. In this volume the tension between the imposed bureaucratic neutrality and phronesis as an emphatic, ethical and social competence is one recurring theme.

In the following I would like to explore this tension. It is present in the official's working-life experience, and we can also find traces of it in some of the theoretical texts we read during this course. To start with I will follow this tension in this theoretical discourse, which takes its starting-point in Aristotle's discussion on phronetics, and Max Weber's analysis of the emergence of bureaucracy. I will then follow this tension within theories on city planning and political philosophy. Thereafter I will discuss two of the texts that were written by the participants on the course described above: Maria Borup's "Samrådsmötet" (The counselling meeting) and Marie Halldin's "Mannen i butiken" (The man at the exhibition), both published in *Medborgardialog – om det svåra i att mötas* (2016). These texts have been chosen as they provide us with many aspects of how this tension turns out in everyday life, Borup and Halldin also provide us with interesting reflections and an eagerness to develop the role of the municipal officials.

Aristotle's concepts of knowledge

Practical knowledge is today an area we seldom reflect upon. One's immediate association might connect it to competences such as the ability to ride a bike or tie the shoelaces. Such abilities are present in Aristotle's discussion on knowledge, but it is also much wider than that. In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, book VI (2014), Aristotle discusses several different kinds of knowledge. Let's focus upon three of them.

Episteme

The *epistemic* knowledge is probably what we normally think about when we talk about knowledge. It is often translated as scientific knowledge and is a kind of theoretical knowledge. This knowledge is general, and abstract, it thus expresses knowledge that is universal and independent of context, for example the laws of physics or mathematical knowledge. It expresses systematic and logical truths and is oriented toward producing proofs. It takes

its starting-point in some axioms, and argues its way toward different conclusions. The most usual forms for the argument are syllogisms and inductions.[2] Aristotle points out that it demands training to gain such knowledge, but young people do better in producing this sort of knowledge than older persons. Such knowledge is also impersonal and can thus be written down in for example a book.

Today we put a lot of trust in this kind of theoretical knowledge and it is an ideal to be able to base most professional actions upon such knowledge. This becomes apparent in for example the constant call for „evidence-based studies," not only in medicine, but also in different social and psychological areas. Also in city planning there is a high confidence in epistemic knowledge. One example is the higher status that technical expertise, with its measurable content, has at the cost of „soft" questions that cannot be measured in the same way, as for example cultural-historical values and social questions.

Techne

In difference to epistemic knowledge, techne is a practical knowledge, which means that its content is „that which could be different." Techne is of course present also in contemporary languages as in „technic" or „technology," but its first meaning is closer to art and points toward that which does not arise by itself in nature, but is created by mankind. This knowledge is goal-oriented and has its goal outside of the action itself, as for example in baking bread or building a house. Such activities are to a part impersonal and the knowledge can be written down in a recipe or a manual. But there is also an embodied and personal dimension of this knowledge, which can only be trained through repetition. An experienced baker has an embodied knowledge that cannot be transferred to others through text.

In the contemporary working-life, at least in the Swedish public sector, which now is organised by means of New Public Management, manuals are increasingly popular as a set of instructions to follow for everyone in the staff, in order to reach the goals of the organization. Through following the same manual, it supposedly becomes of less relevance who it is that performs the task, and the goal completion can more easily be calculated and measured.

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[2]   A syllogism develops truths in concepts, a classic example is: 1) All humans are mortal. 2) Socrates is a human being. 3) Ergo: Socrates is mortal. An induction starts out from empirical observations and draws its conclusions from these, for example: The sun has risen every morning, ergo: it will rise also tomorrow.

Phronesis

Also the phronetic knowledge is a practical knowledge, but of a different kind. It is often translated as practical wisdom and is, in difference to techne, not oriented toward the production of something, but oriented toward the action itself. This means that the quality, or goodness, of the action itself is the goal. In difference to epistemic knowledge, such knowledge always takes place in specific and concrete situation and is thus context-dependent. It shows itself in how one in a certain situation uses rules and treats other human (or living) beings, and as such it demands judgement and a sensibility for the uniqeness of the situation. Aristotle points out that there is no general knowledge on this level of concreteness. Phronesis also differ from mere opinions, which lacks the situational sensibility.

Phronesis is thus context-bound and not universal, it deals with that which is good for all involved parties in a certain situation. As such it has a political dimension, and is not only a social skill in order to make a complicated situation smooth. In difference from epistemic knowledge such knowledge demands long experience from the field it deals with, and is thus more developed among older persons. Aristotle also claims that phronetic knowledge not can be forgotten, as it is a deeply personal knowledge rather than facts that can be learned and forgotten. As such it cannot be learned (only) through reading books, and cannot be summarized in a text. It has been interpreted as tacit (Polanyi 1967), but maybe it only has a different kind of language than the general and abstract language of episteme or the manualized knowledge of techne. As we shall see it can be shown in narratives and reflected upon.

In contemporary working-life phronesis might be the most important kind of knowledge in professions where the meeting between human beings are at the centre. Such intra-human competence is of course central when it comes to conducting citizen dialogues and has thus become more central to city planners and other related professions. But phronesis is probably also that knowledgeform, among the three discussed here, that is least understood and valued today. Today we want to tie up knowledge in texts: proof it and manualize it. But we are nevertheless constantly facing situations where such general knowledge needs to be connected to and enacted in specific situations, and where manuals do not help us. Many situations have a complicated relation to rules and general values as it might not be clear how the situation should be interpreted, which rule it is that should be followed, or which rule it is that should be prioritized above others. There are also situations that are

not included in the rules and questions they don't cover. In all these situations a reflecting judgement is needed, i.e. phronesis.

Max Weber's analysis of the emergence of bureaucracy

Such an Aristotelian perspective on action is in conflict with the ideal of the bureaucratic officials alleged neutrality. This ideal has grown forth in the attempt of modern state to deal with corruption, nepotism and malfeasance. In a constitutional state with its rule of law all citizens should be treated equally, no matter which family you belong to or who your friend is. Because of these reasons, an ignorance of context is developed and the rules should be applied in a "blind" way. The modern state is built upon these principles and the task of the state officials is to uphold it.

In his analysis of the emergency of modern bureaucracy Max Weber points out that this neutrality also is connected to a strong belief in calculating rationality. This rationality has the possibility to control and understand every part of the universe, which he also called a disenchantment of the world. There is thus *one* rational and correct answer to each question. He compares the modern society to traditional societies, which he understands as enchanted and animated, and where authority is connected to the hiddenness of the divine. In the modern and secular, society scientific knowledge is emphasised as well as a management by objectives thorough rational reasoning. The key point in the disenchanted world is the *faith* in the possibility to know everything, and in truth to be one and reachable. We might not know everything, but there is nothing we *could not* know, if we only focused upon it. There is nothing that is per definition not knowable and we gain knowledge through measurement and calculation. This includes a mathematization and technologization of the world.

There are many obvious gains in the disenchanted world, but Weber also formulates its disadvantages. The modern society risks becoming an iron cage of rationality, a cultural rationalisation that brings a loss of existential ground through a devaluation of mystics, mythology and magic. It includes a constantly growing bureaucracy and the search for the perfect manual that covers every situation (Weber 1922).

Using Aristotle's terminology, the bureaucratisation includes a growing faith in episteme and techne, and there is no room for phronesis. Knowledge should, and could, be placed on neutral ground in a text, and should not be dependent upon a certain person. Truth exists on a general level, and there is nothing in a specific situation that cannot be fully covered by general terms.

There is thus a de-contextualisation and simplification of truth and knowledge. Phronesis with its sensitivity to specificities is connected to corruption, and in order to avoid corruption, the rules and manuals comes first. Weber's analysis is still valid (even if interesting analysis of the enchantment of modern society has also been made, see for example Jane Bennett 2001). It is also clear that this results in a paradox: corruption poses a constant threat to government, but the exclusion of phronetic knowledge tends to create an inhuman society.

Tension in theory of city planning and political philosophy

Weber wrote his texts in the beginning of the 20th century. In the 1960s a criticism against the idea of the officials neutrality grew forth in the theory of city planning, by among others Paul and Linda Davidoff. They were critical against the idea of the city planner as a neutral figure, and against city planning as an area free from values, building purely on technical and rational solutions. Their suggestion was instead that city planning should start in giving different groups professional help to develop their suggestions with starting-point in different values and experiences, a method they called „advocacy-planning." The task of the officials would then not be to be neutral and represent a common rationality, but to take part in developing different perspectives, and many different possible futures. The question of phronesis is not an explicit part of this discussion, but the belief that different experiences creates different values and different futures, point toward a sensibility for context and specificity (Davidoff 2008).

Ten years later, in 1973, the belief in the possibility to answer every question through calculating rationality, which Weber formulated, received a heavy blow. In their article "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning", Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber (1973) formulated a different epistemological direction for city planning. They questioned the belief that there is a complete knowledge that solves all problems in city planning and that planning should be executed by neutral officials that each one is expert within their (technical) area. Instead they meant that problems within city planning is „wicked," i.e. *not possible* to get full knowledge about. Since planning is about the future, the presentation of the problem can never be unambiguous; it is rather a question of power and about who has the interpretative prerogative. The way the question is posed also decides which values are allowed to form the future. Planning is thus not a neutral field, but always contains conflicts, values and insufficient knowledge. The official can thus never know when the „right" question is posed, or get any univocal and objective answers. In a similar

way there is neither an uncomplicated common interest. We can't even in any complete way know when a question is sufficiently explored in order to provide an answer and start realizing a plan. (Rittel and Webber 1973) And yet the city planner needs to act. Rittel and Webber do not provide us with any answers but rather points out the character of the field, the same field where today citizen dialogues take place. As city planning is not a task for neutral counting, we might be left with wise judgement – and the constant battle about which judgement is wise.

This tension between objective neutrality and conflicting perspectives is also present in a political-philosophical discussion, which can be instantiated by Jürgen Habermas' faith in the rational discourse in a consensus-seeking democracy and agreement on one side (see for example Habermas 1981), and Chantal Mouffe's criticism of consensus on the other side (2005). Judith Innes takes Habermas' lead and brings it to city planning, as she claims that planning should take place through dialogues between representatives of different groups. In such dialogues the participants sit down in smaller groups, listen to each other, negotiates and creates common ideas about how the society should be developed. (Innes 1996) Here there is a recognition of the importance of different perspectives, but these are supposed to be brought under a common rationality that will bring them to a consensus. There is thus also here *one* rationality.

Mouffe, and many others with her, means that democracy and the political not only should be focused upon developing such a common rationality. The problem is that the search for consensus hides conflicts of power, when the ones in power „hides" behind a seemingly rational and neutral position. Instead the most important task for democracy is to accept that there always will be foundational conflicts and that we need to let them come to expression within the frame of democratic politics. Only through letting the conflicts be expressed in legitimate forms can an aggressive antagonism, which only becomes worse by being oppressed, be turned into an agonism. (Mouffe, 2005) Against Mouffe it could be argued that every attempt to build a society needs dimensions of „getting along," and the tendency to seek consensus can thus not, or should not, be erased – even if not every point of view is included and power always is unevenly distributed.

After phronesis was banned in bureaucracy, in order not to create corruption, the belief in a common rationality created new power structures. Rationality was thought to be one and the same for everyone, and not dependent on values, experiences and context. But this position has been critizised and lead to new conflicts and a theoretical critic of the ideal of neutrality. The al-

ternative has thus in many cases been to give room for conflicts. But the theoretical focus on pointing out the impossibilities and necessity of conflicts has lead to less interest for competences or knowledges that are needed in order to deal with such unknowing and conflicting desires. Practicians are often left with either a theory that help them little, but only state the problematic situation, or peppy manuals. But maybe a discussion on phronesis could help us further and help us connect the theoretical characterisation of the situation to the officials need to act. But before we look closer on two attempts to discuss these questions from the point of view of the officials, let's bring in one more theoretical perspective, since one central question is the relation between the official and his or hers organization.

Another call for judgement

How do we make wise decisions beyond calculations? One central aspect is the official's awareness of the fact that their neutrality always is connected to the ideology the state serves and produces. An ideology the officials largely need to share in order for the situation not to be strained. But ideology is always ambiguous. On one side human beings always need to have values, central categories and thought patterns, which can be summarized as an ideology. But on the other side there is a constant risk that the ideology becomes an illusion that embellish and hides, or that it becomes to one-eyed and unpragmatic. When we examine ideological structures, we thus also examine power structures.

In relation to citizen dialogues it is obvious that ideology and power are central aspects. The officials that carry them out often does it within an explicit ideology of democracy, everyone's equal value and a consensus seeking dialogue. Nevertheless, the organizations involved also carries misogynist and racist heritages. Individual officials within the state or municipal administration are part of this heritage if they want it or not. As Hannah Arendt states, we cannot be individuals without belonging to a collective. This also means that we cannot be fully separated from the history and society we belong to. We are inevitably part of one or several traditions. To Arendt this means that we also need to take responsibility for these. Arendt differs between guilt and responsibility: we are not guilty for events that happened earlier in a collective we belong to, but we nevertheless have a responsibility for them. Guilt points backwards, towards what happened, but responsibility points forward. We are responsible to change the heritage the way we think is right, and not unreflectedly pass it on. (Arendt 1987) This goes not least for officials who in ma-

ny situations personify the local authority and its history, and thus have to take responsibility for its earlier values and actions, even when they personally not in any way are guilty of them. This means that officials are not only gears in a wheel; they are also responsible persons with a judgement of their own. To build authority upon such a perspective would also be a way to minimize the risk for banal evil, and the attitude of 'I only did what I was told to do,' which of course also was one of Arendt's greatest interests (Arendt 1963).

State and municipal officials have to act and through city planning develop the future society. They often find themselves in sensitive and conflicted situations, and need to take traditions, explicit rules, power structures, individual and collective values under consideration. Through raising their gaze and get the possibility to an advanced reflection, a judgement and practical knowledge to deal with this kind of situations can be developed. It might also be a possible way for officials to take responsibility for their society and transform the role of the bureaucrat.

Let's take a closer look upon two stories reflecting real situations where the conflict between neutrality and phronesis comes to a head.

The officiant between Weber and Arendt

Marie Halldin works as a city planner in the municipal of Upplands Väsby in Sweden and describes in a text on her practical knowledge the tension between ideals of neutrality and those of empathy and phronesis (2016). She describes how she at an exhibition of a comprehensive plan, which is also an open citizen dialogue, starts to talk with a neatly dressed older man. She is interested in his experiences of living in the municipality, since the task of this citizen dialogue is exactly to gather such experiences. After a while it turns out that the man repeats certain stories and formulations over and over again, and Marie[3] realises that he probably suffers from dementia, but as it is well hidden she starts to wonder if anyone knows about his condition.

She suddenly realises that she has spent too much time on this man, there is more people in the exhibition room who wants information and her colleague starts to look irritated. She struggles with an internal conflict, and thinks to herself: „What should be most important, my professionalism and loyalty to my colleague? […] Or my empathy, the insight that I might be one of few persons who has understood his condition?" (Halldin, 36, 2016, my

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[3]   I have here chosen to call her by her first name, since she let's us take part of her personal experiences, actions and reflections. The same goes for Maria Borup in the following section.

translation) She tries to ask him if there is someone to help him, and tries to figure out a way to make him contact someone in health care. But it is difficult and after a while she wants to turn her attention to another person who patiently has been waiting for her attention, thinking:

Maybe he can wait for a moment while I speak to someone else? I pat him on his arm again.
— I will talk more with you in a minute, I shall just talk a little with this other visitor, she has been waiting for a while now.
— I turn to the waiting women with a smile and turn my back to the elderly man to clearly show him that we not can talk for a while. But when I have turned around the man loudly shouts:
DON'T GO!!!! I'm SO LONELY!!! There is NO ONE, no one at all!!! His call dies out in a sob.
It is very quite. Some persons in the room turn around. The man has become everyone's focus. Suddenly he becomes aware of what he has done. He closes his mouth with a little clap, and is transformed from scared and desperate to a polite, neat man again. In a second he gathers his dignity and stiffly leaves the room.
I stand perplexed. I do nothing.
[…]
The meeting with the man leaves an existential problematic behind. What is it to be a fellow human? Where does bureaucracy ends? Where does it *have to* end in order not to be evil, or at least an insensitive distancing towards those in need? Is everything always „someone else's problem" to the bureaucrat who is but a wheel in the machinery?
I have no answers, but I still look for the man in order to make up for something diffuse that I have a problem to make clear even to myself. (Halldin, 38, 2016, my translation)

Marie's task as an official was here to inform about the comprehensive plan and collect experiences and opinions from the citizens. Her meeting with the old man put her in a dilemma where she did not know if she should prioritize the bureaucratic ideal or empathy. What she describes is a difficult situation without clear answers on how she should act. If the man would have been seriously injured the human aspect would of course have taken the upper hand. But here there is a hidden, underlying problem that initially only she can see. And it is not easy for her to know what to do in order to help the man; she does not want to intrude, but neither to abandon him.

The result is that he leaves the exhibition after his little outburst and that they never meet again.

Weber's rationality didn't help her at this occasion. She has an internal fight with her own role: is she in relation to the old man just one fellow citizen among others or does she as an municipal official have a special responsibility?

During the course when she wrote this text, she got acquainted with the concept of phronesis, and understands the situation as a tension between phronesis – an ability that she experiences as unknown and not as prioritized in her working environment – and a Weberian neutral ideal – as something that is implicitly mediated between the officials, and as an unreflected norm within her tradition. She writes: „When the first instinct to help did not succeed it was a relief to „be allowed" to go back to the task of the official, which was to „do my job" and speak to the next person – who had been waiting patiently – and „reward" her with my attention, instead of the „difficult" man who's diffuse problems I had no experience of, or routine to handle" (Halldin, 40, 2016, my translation).

She describes how she according to her role as a municipal official is expected to stay focused on her task and let everything else in the room pass without notice. She thus becomes part of a machinery where she has a specific task to fulfil, and where that which does not fit into that task is someone else's problem. The role as official should include a certain distance between citizen and official, but Marie wonders if this distance is there also to protect the official from too complicated questions. It thus also produces a certain callousness.

Starting in Arendt's discussion on guilt and responsibility, Marie emphasizes that she as a municipal official has a different responsibility than the citizen. As official she personalizes the municipal authorities as a collective, a collective that has a certain historical guilt when it comes to not seeing or understanding the needs of the citizens. She therefore has a responsibility for the system that she is part of, she needs to, and wants to counter the tendency the municipal authority has to become an inhuman machine. Her task is not only to follow the rules that her superior has decided, but also to take responsibility for the collective she is part of. The phronetic capability she is looking for is a creative capacity: „In the case with the man in the exhibition, the bureaucrat [i.e. herself] saw the citizen turn into a patient. When the bureaucrat in the task to carry out a citizen dialogue understood that the citizen was a patient, the moral analysis needs to adjust and conclude that dialogue-work is wrong right now, and care is right" (Halldin, 42–43, 2016, my translation).

Phronesis of the citizen dialogue

As we have seen the contemporary bureaucratic society prioritize the knowledge forms of episteme and techne. But even if most officials don't use the concept of phronesis, they do have an understanding for its content, today we often think about it in terms of social skills, good judgement etc. We do discuss it at coffee breaks and other occasions, even if it seldom is thematized as such or reflected as a professional knowledge. In Maria Borup's text (2016), in the same anthology as Marie Halldin's text, we can see how it is exercised in the quite. In her text, Maria describes a citizen dialogue with very upset participants, towards the end one of them says: „– We just bought a house here in order for our children to grow up in a safe, countryside environment. Can you understand how much you are destroying with this fucking road? We have saved money for a long time to be able to live here, and now I'm learning that the municipal authorities are about to build a huge road and direct loads of heavy traffic into the area.

She stands very close to me and spits out the words at the same time as I can see tears in her eyes. I think to myself: „Now I can only listen, not come with any arguments or any comments about sending formal statements to the municipal authority. My colleagues would think that I'm unprofessional who lets this happen. But she must be allowed to tell her side of the story!" (Borup, 23, 2016, my translation)

The colleagues have earlier pointed out that Maria's task on this citizen dialogue is to focus on the greater perspectives and the public welfare that the road will contribute to, and she is given the advice to keep the meeting as short and informative as possible and not open up for any discussion. But she does not agree and realizes that her colleagues would think that she is paying to much respect to those that happens to be present and thus get's stuck in the situation and looses sight of its higher purposes. But Maria has a reason for this, she sees other purposes:

Finally the time is 9 pm, the meeting is supposed to end and two of my colleagues need to go, those of us that stays tries to wrap up the meeting. "But we will have closed all doors to any kind of dialogue for a long time if I say that the meeting is over now," I think to myself (Borup, 23, 2016, my translation).

Maybe we could say that her gaze is lifted toward some of democracy's cornerstones rather than towards a technically successful city planning. Through being present in the situation she perceives a question at stake, a qu-

estion about that which makes democracy work: trust. She would not have seen this if she would have been focused upon a technical argument about the best technical solution, or if she would have sticked to the manual the meeting preceded accordingly. Maria stayed and the conversation continued in the entrance hall, outside the official meeting room. And there something interesting happens. In the entrance hall their roles started to change – the roles that were very fixed in the meeting room. In the meeting room Maria and the other officials were experienced, both by the participants and themselves, as representatives for the local authorities in a way that made them unflexible. The participants were subjected to this order, which they at the same time tried to object against.

It is in the entrance hall that Maria realizes that she "only can listen" and must let go of the official's argumentation and formal comment on sending statements. Here the conversation gives room for the stories and perspectives of those that live in the area, and they start to come with suggestions: firstly on how the process should have been, and then more concrete suggestions about the area. The conversation turned, even if everything spoke against it. Not that the citizens lay down flat for the authorities, but they showed how the process could be done in a better way and the discussion become more nuanced and thoughtful. Maria and the other officials still represented the authorities in the entrance hall, they did not become private persons, but they were now focused on their function in a democratic process in creating a space where the citizens meet, have different opinions, and discuss common questions. This perspective had been forgotten, or ignored, in the planning and execution of the dialogue. The phronetic skill that made this shift possible included a responsiveness to the situation, an insight into what is important and a long row of small decisions upon how to act. Maria's decision to just listen and not to argue was one of them.

In these sorts of complicated situations a phronetic knowledge is something more than social flexibility, it is not only about cushion the conflicts, but about reflecting upon what „the best for everyone" means in a concrete situation, and have a sensitivity for how to get there. Maria, and many with her, has a moral compass that directs her actions, even when she is in an environment with another focus. Her colleagues advises her to be tuff, and just do her job with as little dialogue as possible, they know that the officials often are under great pressure at these sorts of meetings, and want to help her find strategies to keep her neutrality. But Maria silently protests against their interpretation of the situation, and values the fact that democracy is something else than the best technical solution.

Concluding reflection

The neutral bureaucrat and a Habermasian ideal of consensus are dominant in Swedish municipal authorities. But when it comes to organize citizen dialogues such neutrality can never be enough as it makes us unsensitive for what is going on in the particular situation. In this article I have tried to show how ideals of neutrality stand in conflict with phronetic knowledge and an individual responsibility for the collective. It is not a question about only valuing one side in this tension: both are needed in a democratic administration. But as one side today is dominant and we even often lack terminology for the other side, we need to bring forth phronetic skills and emphasize individual responsibility for the collective. In this way we can develop a human bureaucracy beyond neutrality, without opening up to corruption.

The discussions on phronesis mostly emphasize an individual level, as that is where these sorts of decisions are made. There are nevertheless presuppositions needed in order for the officials to develop their judgement and be capable of wise reflections. And these presuppositions can be structurally organized. In order to develop phronesis, a room for reflection is needed. Such a room can for example be organized through discussing concrete dilemmas and connect them to different theoretical perspectives. In this way bureaucrats and officials can develop their roles as professionals into a more phronetic direction.

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