

## A theoretical framework for understanding power, existence and decision-making in municipal administration

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### Abstract

This paper introduces a novel conceptual framework titled "The Metaphysics of Local Governance", which explores the deeper philosophical foundations underlying municipal administration and local decision-making. Unlike traditional approaches that focus on procedural legality or administrative efficiency, this framework investigates the existential and ontological dimensions of power, authority, and urban planning. Drawing from metaphysical philosophy, political theory, and critical legal studies, the paper raises fundamental questions such as: What gives a local council its legitimacy? Can a decision exist legally but lack real-world impact? How do decisions shape—or merely reflect—the reality of a city? The study adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodology, including philosophical inquiry and case-based analysis, to develop a new analytical lens for examining hidden assumptions behind governance systems. This theoretical model is particularly relevant in contexts where legal frameworks intersect with complex socio-political realities, such as in Palestinian local governance. It offers a unique perspective on how local governance can be reinterpreted through a philosophical and existential approach.

**Keywords:** Metaphysics of Governance; Local Councils; Ontology of Power; Municipal Administration; Legal Legitimacy; Decision-Making; Theoretical Framework

### 1. Introduction to the Concept

The concept of local governance has long been anchored in administrative, legal, and institutional frameworks. Traditional studies emphasize procedures, structures, and performance indicators, often ignoring the deeper philosophical questions that underlie governance systems. This paper proposes a new approach: understanding local governance not merely as a function of state power or public administration, but as a metaphysical phenomenon involving existence, authority, and meaning.

This framework—"The Metaphysics of Local Governance"—does not dismiss the value of technical or legal analysis. Rather, it enriches it by integrating metaphysical philosophy, political theory, and critical legal studies. It challenges the reader to ask: Why do local councils exist beyond their legal definitions? What constitutes the being of a mayor or the essence of a public decision? How do these structures acquire meaning within a community's collective consciousness?

Through this lens, local governance is examined as a lived and symbolic reality—where legitimacy is not only granted by law, but also shaped by belief, perception, and collective recognition. This is particularly relevant in fragmented or transitional political environments, such as Palestine, where questions of legitimacy, sovereignty, and power are constantly renegotiated.

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By proposing a theoretical model rooted in metaphysics, this study aims to shift the discourse from "how governance works" to "why governance matters"—offering new pathways for academic inquiry, legal reflection, and policy innovation.

### 1.1. Philosophical Grounding: From Aristotle to Local Governance

As Aristotle defined it, metaphysics—also referred to as "first philosophy"—is the science that studies being as being, investigating the primary principles and fundamental causes underlying all things (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, [9], [11]).

Metaphysics does not confine itself to the material world; rather, it extends beyond the physical to include the immaterial and unseen, encompassing concepts such as essence, mind, and the "first cause" ([1], [2]).

From this philosophical starting point, a critical question arises for scholars exploring the metaphysics of local governance:

#### 1.1.1. *What does it mean for a local authority to truly "exist"?*

Is its existence confined to legal registration and administrative function? Or does it also entail a real presence in the consciousness of the community and in the fabric of the city itself?

From this philosophical starting point, a critical question arises for scholars exploring the metaphysics of local governance:

#### 1.1.2. *What does it mean for a local authority to truly "exist"?*

Is its existence confined to legal registration and administrative function? Or does it also entail a real presence in the consciousness of the community and in the fabric of the city itself?

Accordingly, research into the metaphysics of local governance aims to:

- Understand the essence of local entities beyond legal and bureaucratic definitions.
- Explore the collective will or political consciousness that animates these bodies.
- Identify the first cause or ultimate purpose of their existence—be it public service, civic order, or social justice.

This line of analysis allows us to view local governance not merely as an administrative apparatus, but as a philosophical, social, and cultural entity—one that may help redefine the very idea of governance through an ontological and existential lens. "While decisions made by the mayor and municipal council are formally legal and administrative in nature, their true metaphysical significance must be reflected in the lived experiences of the community..."

Moreover, applying this framework in real-world contexts—especially those like Palestine—can contribute to liberating local authorities from the dominance of centralized governments. Under this reimagined structure, municipalities would no longer be subjected to arbitrary directives or the risk of dissolution by higher political powers. Instead, their legitimacy would stem from—and be accountable to—the citizens and taxpayers who fund them. In this vision, it is the people who empower and sustain their municipalities, and only they possess the rightful authority to enact change. This shift not only enhances the resilience and sustainability of local governance but also aligns it more closely with principles of transparency, public will, and democratic accountability.

### 1.2. Core Idea

At the heart of the metaphysical framework is a fundamental reimagining of local governance—not as a purely legal or administrative operation, but as an existential structure shaped by belief, perception, and collective ontology. Traditional analyses often reduce municipal systems to bureaucratic mechanisms, institutional outputs, or legal compliance. However, this framework asks a deeper set of questions:

- What is the essence of a municipal council?
- Does a mayor "exist" politically due to statutory authority, or due to a shared belief in the legitimacy of their role?
- Do municipal decisions construct reality, or merely respond to it?
- Is local power embedded in physical infrastructure and legal documentation, or in the intangible structures of perception, symbolism, and tradition?

This theoretical repositioning allows for a critical investigation of how governance structures become “real” in the eyes of the public, and how ontological legitimacy may diverge from legal legitimacy. It also opens the door to a richer understanding of failure, where inaction or symbolic voids may constitute existential gaps in local governance. By emphasizing the metaphysical dimensions of governance—being, meaning, recognition—this core idea reframes municipal decision-making as both a technical and existential act.

### 1.3. Key Theoretical Pillars

This framework is supported by five foundational theoretical pillars:

#### 1.3.1. *Ontology of Authority*

Explores the metaphysical question of being: What does it mean for local authority to “exist”? Does authority reside in law, in belief, or in symbolic power?

#### 1.3.2. *Epistemology of Decision-Making*

Investigates how decisions are known, understood, and legitimized. What makes a decision valid—not just legally, but morally and ontologically?

#### 1.3.3. *Causality in Governance*

Questions the direction of cause and effect: Do governance structures shape outcomes, or do systemic conditions shape governance?

#### 1.3.4. *Temporal Reality of Local Planning*

Considers the relationship between past, present, and future in urban development. How do current decisions invoke or disrupt historical trajectories?

#### 1.3.5. *Existential Role of the Citizen*

Views the citizen not as a passive recipient of services, but as a co-creator of municipal existence. Participation becomes a metaphysical act of meaning-making.

#### 1.3.6. *Sample Questions for Analysis Under This Framework*

To illustrate the practical relevance of the metaphysical approach, the following sample questions are proposed for scholarly, legal, and policy-based inquiry:

- What gives a local council its ontological legitimacy beyond legal texts?
- Can a council decision be legally valid but metaphysically hollow?
- Is the mayor a person, a role, or a symbolic representation of the city's will?
- How does the absence of a decision affect the “existence” of a public service?
- Do laws govern reality, or do they construct it?

These questions are not only philosophical—they are practical tools for assessing how governance is perceived, internalized, and enacted within communities. They encourage a deeper investigation of symbolic authority, legal substance, and existential presence in local governance dynamics.

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## 2. Purpose and Application

The primary purpose of this theoretical framework is to provide scholars, legal analysts, urban planners, and policy practitioners with an expanded lens through which to examine local governance. By stepping beyond conventional administrative and legalistic paradigms, the metaphysical approach invites a more profound engagement with the meaning, existence, and legitimacy of governance itself.

This framework offers both conceptual enrichment and analytical utility. It can be applied in contexts where governance structures appear to function on paper but lack existential legitimacy among the public. It is particularly relevant in politically unstable or transitional environments—such as Palestine—where legal authority often coexists with public skepticism, contested sovereignty, or symbolic voids.

## 2.1. Potential Applications

- Analyzing the legitimacy of local leadership beyond statutory appointments and electoral outcomes.
- Evaluating the ontological weight of decisions, especially in situations where formal resolutions fail to produce tangible outcomes.
- Interpreting municipal silence or inaction not merely as administrative failure but as existential absence.
- Exploring urban development as a process of metaphysical becoming—not just a technical blueprint.
- Assessing participatory processes through the lens of symbolic co-creation and recognition.

By reframing governance as a metaphysical act, this framework expands the space for interdisciplinary dialogue—linking law, philosophy, and public administration in ways that reveal new dimensions of local power, justice, and responsibility.

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## 3. Methodological Approach

The methodological foundation of this framework is rooted in qualitative inquiry, embracing philosophical depth, interpretive rigor, and contextual sensitivity. Given its conceptual orientation, the study draws on the following approaches:

- Philosophical Inquiry: Engaging with metaphysical texts and traditions—from Aristotle to contemporary theorists—to construct the foundational questions of existence, power, and authority.
- Critical Discourse Analysis: Examining legal texts, policy documents, and public speeches for underlying metaphysical assumptions, symbolic language, and discursive constructions of legitimacy.
- Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: Understanding lived experiences and perceptions of governance through interviews, case studies, or ethnographic narratives that reveal how individuals co-construct meaning in the civic sphere.
- Case-Based Analysis: Applying the metaphysical framework to specific municipalities or governance situations—such as Palestinian local councils—to assess how existential legitimacy plays out in complex political realities.

### 3.1. Related Theories and Influences

This framework is shaped by a range of theoretical traditions and thinkers whose work intersects with questions of power, meaning, authority, and existence:

#### 3.1.1. Aristotle – *Metaphysics*

Provides the foundational concepts of being, substance, and causality, which inform the ontological inquiries of this framework.

#### 3.1.2. Michel Foucault – *Power and Knowledge*

His analysis of discourse and the construction of social realities offers critical insights into how governance systems legitimize authority and define truth.

#### 3.1.3. Hannah Arendt – *The Human Condition*

Explores the nature of action, power, and the public realm, contributing to the existential understanding of civic participation and political life.

#### 3.1.4. Giorgio Agamben – *State of Exception*

Introduces the idea of suspended legality and the role of sovereign power, especially relevant in contexts where normal governance is disrupted.

#### 3.1.5. Jürgen Habermas – *Legitimation Crisis*

Provides a framework for understanding how modern governance systems face crises of meaning, trust, and justification.

### 3.1.6. *Critical Legal Studies*

Challenges the neutrality of legal systems and reveals how laws often mask deeper power dynamics and ideological constructs.

### 3.1.7. *New Public Management vs. Critical Theory*

Contrasts managerial efficiency models with frameworks that emphasize reflexivity, democratic engagement, and structural critique.

By drawing from these diverse sources, the metaphysical framework gains theoretical depth and interdisciplinary resonance, enabling a rich exploration of how local governance functions not just administratively, but ontologically and symbolically.

This methodological pluralism allows for a nuanced understanding of governance as a layered and multifaceted phenomenon—one that cannot be fully grasped through empirical metrics alone. Instead, it requires a philosophical sensitivity to how concepts like being, time, identity, and meaning shape the very fabric of municipal administration.

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## 4. Example Use in Research

To illustrate the practical relevance of the metaphysical framework, let us consider an applied research scenario grounded in the complexities of municipal governance:

### 4.1. Research Question

How can a local council make a decision that is legally sound but socially meaningless?

### 4.2. Analytical Application

Using the metaphysical framework, this research would go beyond assessing the decision's legality or procedural correctness. Instead, it would interrogate whether the decision possesses ontological presence—i.e., whether it is acknowledged, felt, and internalized by the community it affects.

### 4.3. The analysis would explore

- Whether the decision has been symbolically recognized by the public.
- Whether the outcome of the decision resonates with lived urban realities.
- Whether the timing and communication of the decision align with the existential expectations of the populace.
- Whether silence, absence of implementation, or symbolic dissonance undermines the perceived legitimacy of the act.

For example, a municipal council might pass a resolution to establish a public park. Legally, the decision is complete—documented, approved, and allocated. Yet if the park is never built, or built in a way that disregards community needs, the decision becomes metaphysically void: it exists on paper, but not in the collective consciousness or lived experience of the people.

This example illustrates how metaphysical analysis can offer richer layers of interpretation beyond compliance and performance. It underscores how decisions must "exist" in the full sense—not just administratively, but symbolically, socially, and existentially.

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## 5. Example Use in Research

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## 6. Recommendations

Since this is a theoretical and conceptual framework, the recommendations proposed are not "practical" in the conventional sense (e.g., budget allocations or administrative reforms), but rather philosophical, analytical, and methodological guidelines designed to influence future research, academic exploration, and institutional practice.

### 6.1. Adopt Interdisciplinary Approaches in Studying Local Governance

Encourage scholars and practitioners to integrate metaphysical, philosophical, and existential perspectives alongside legal and administrative analysis.

Why? Because local governance is not only a structural function but also a symbolic and ontological phenomenon. Understanding the essence of authority provides deeper insights into power relations and legitimacy.

### 6.2. Reconsider the Ontological Status of Municipal Authority

Reframe local councils and elected officials as existential constructs shaped by collective belief, historical context, and symbolic resonance—not solely by legal instruments.

Why? Because authority that exists only in statutes but lacks public recognition is ontologically fragile.

### 6.3. Develop Analytical Tools to Assess Existential Legitimacy

Create qualitative instruments and theoretical frameworks that evaluate governance not just by compliance or output, but by ontological presence—i.e., whether decisions and institutions are perceived as "real" by the community.

Why? Because governance effectiveness is contingent not only on formal authority but also on symbolic affirmation.

### 6.4. Promote Critical Legal Studies within Public Administration

Encourage the incorporation of critical legal theory into governance training to expose hidden ideologies, power dynamics, and discursive practices that shape administrative realities.

Why? Because legal systems often reinforce status quos that appear neutral but perpetuate inequality or symbolic exclusion.

### 6.5. Support Theoretical and Philosophical Research in Governance Studies

Fund and publish more conceptual studies that explore governance through ontological, metaphysical, and symbolic lenses.

Why? Because quantitative and empirical research, while vital, cannot fully capture the symbolic depth and meaning of public authority.

### 6.6. Reimagine Urban Planning as a Metaphysical Process

Train urban planners and policymakers to understand city-building not just as technical infrastructure but as a process of shaping collective existence, memory, and aspiration.

Why? Because the future of a city is not just built; it is imagined and existentially constructed.

### 6.7. Include Philosophical Education in Public Administration Curricula

Integrate modules on ontology, power, symbolic meaning, and metaphysical thought into university programs and professional development for governance professionals.

Why? Because governance practitioners need tools to understand the symbolic and existential dimensions of their authority.

These recommendations aim to establish a deeper intellectual and ethical foundation for local governance—one that moves beyond technocratic performance and legal compliance to embrace the symbolic, existential, and philosophical dimensions that truly sustain legitimacy and public trust.

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## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, "The Metaphysics of Local Governance" offers not only a philosophical departure from mainstream analyses of municipal administration but also a transformative lens with far-reaching implications. By engaging deeply with questions of power, existence, and symbolic authority, this framework introduces a set of interpretive tools that bridge metaphysical thought and public sector practice.

Looking forward, the application of this theoretical model—once fully expanded with empirical data, case studies, and standard analytical tools—holds tremendous potential to reshape how legitimacy, governance, and decision-making are understood in local contexts. Specifically, it may significantly enhance developmental planning, policy integrity, and institutional transparency by introducing evaluative criteria rooted in existential relevance rather than procedural formality.

This vision challenges conventional approaches and paves the way for a new generation of research, one that recognizes the invisible architectures of governance and dares to question the metaphysical dimensions that sustain or undermine it. The promise of this theory lies in its ability to unearth what no previous framework has dared to illuminate—and in doing so, inspire more honest, grounded, and visionary practices of local governance.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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