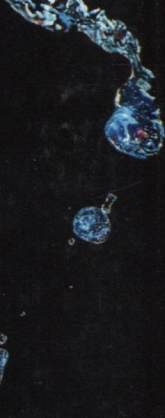


METHODS IN ANALYTICAL POLITICAL THEORY

Edited by Adrian Blau





This is the first book to explain how to use key methods in analytical political theory. The methods discussed include contractualism, reflective equilibrium, positive political theory, thought experiments and ideological analysis. Many discussions of political theory methods describe and justify these methods with little or no discussion of their application, emphasizing 'what is' and 'why do' over 'how to'. This book covers all three. Each chapter explains what kinds of problems in political theory might require researchers to use a particular method, the basic principles behind the method being proposed, and an analysis of how to apply it, including concrete principles of good practice. The book thus summarizes methodological ideas, grouped in one place and made accessible to students, and it makes innovative contributions to research methods in analytical political theory.

"At last, a compendium of practical advice about how to do analytical political theory. This collection of expert, accessible mini-manifestos goes straight to the top of my graduate students' list of essential reading."

Professor Adam Swift, Department of Politics and International Studies, *University of Warwick*

Adrian Blau is Senior Lecturer in Politics in the Department of Political Economy at *King's College London*. He has published in *History of Political Thought* (2009) and *The Journal of Politics* (2012), and is currently writing a book called *Hobbes's Failed Science of Politics and Ethics*. His research focuses on the history of political thought and research methods in political theory.

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Blau

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Contributors

Brooke Ackerly is Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at Vanderbilt University.

Rochana Bajpai is Senior Lecturer in Politics in the Department of Politics and International Studies at SOAS.

Adrian Blau is Senior Lecturer in Politics in the Department of Political Economy at King's College London.

Kimberley Brownlee is Associate Professor of Legal and Moral Philosophy in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Warwick.

Keith Dowding is Professor of Political Science in the School of Politics and International Relations at the Australian National University.

Michael L. Frazer is Lecturer in Political and Social Theory in the School of Politics, Philosophy, Language and Communication Studies at the University of East Anglia.

Gerald Gaus is the James E. Rogers Professor of Philosophy in the Philosophy Department at the University of Arizona.

Robert E. Goodin is Distinguished Professor in the School of Philosophy at the Australian National University.

Alan Hamlin is Emeritus Professor of Political Theory in Politics, School of Social Sciences at the University of Manchester, and Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Political Economy at King's College London.

Robert Jubb is Lecturer in Political Theory in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Reading.

Carl Knight is Lecturer in Political Theory in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Glasgow.

Brian Kogelmann is a PhD student in the Philosophy Department at the University of Arizona.

Jonathan Leader Maynard is Departmental Lecturer in International Relations in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Oxford.

Johan Olsthoorn is a post-doctoral fellow of the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO)/KU Leuven.

Jonathan Quong is Associate Professor of Philosophy in the School of Philosophy at the University of Southern California.

David Schmidt is Kendrick Professor of Philosophy (College of Social & Behavior Sciences) and Eller Chair of Service-Dominant Logic (College of Management) at the University of Arizona.

Zofia Stemplowska is Associate Professor of Political Theory at Worcester College, Oxford.

Preface

I had the idea for this book in late 2008. The central concept has stayed the same – a ‘how-to’ book with practical advice in bold type. But much else has changed. I owe a great deal to early guidance from my former colleagues at the Manchester Centre for Political Theory (MANCEPT), especially Alan Hamlin, Jon Quong and Hillel Steiner. My Cambridge University Press editor, John Haslam, and my anonymous reviewers had invaluable advice about content and scope: they made this book far better.

I have greatly enjoyed working with my contributors. I wanted every chapter to give clear, concrete advice grounded in examples of good or bad practice. It was a pleasure to see this take shape and I hope our readers will benefit.

I dedicate this book to the memory of my father, Nat Blau, who passed away in 2010 after a long and productive life. He was a doctor, researcher and teacher. He would have approved of a book that seeks to be helpful, practical and well exemplified.

My father had a strong sense of our intellectual limits: for example, he sometimes said that ‘if a theory explains all the facts, the theory must be wrong, because some of the facts are wrong.’ This book is written not in the expectation that our arguments and tips are right, but in the hope that enough of them are right that we can advance the debate – and that readers’ challenges to our arguments and tips will do so further.

This is the first book of its kind. It must not be the last.

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1 Introduction: A ‘How-to’ Approach

Adrian Blau

1 Introduction

This is the first ‘how-to’ handbook in political theory. It describes different methods (‘what is method X?’), justifies them (‘why do method X?’), and explains what to do (‘how should I do method X?’). ‘How-to’ guidance is our main aim. Political scientists have hundreds of such handbooks, from general overviews on research design to textbooks on specific techniques. Philosophers have dozens of handbooks on logic and critical thinking. But political theorists have no handbook on how to apply the methods we use.

Existing books on political theory methods typically describe and justify methods without much detail on implementation – ‘what is’ and ‘why do’ more than ‘how to’. For example, Quentin Skinner’s book on methods in the history of political thought contains relatively little practical guidance (Skinner 2002: 40–2, 75–6, 79–80, 114–20). If you want to interpret texts like Skinner, you will learn more from his actual research. Similarly, there is little advice on how to implement the methods and approaches covered in the fine volume edited by Leopold and Stears (2008).

When we praise or criticize work in political theory, ‘how-to’ principles are often implicit. For example, if you find that some definitions are clearer than others, you have already grasped some principles of conceptual clarity, consciously or subconsciously. But you will struggle to find much published guidance on defining terms clearly. Our book aims to make such implicit principles explicit and adds new how-to principles as well.

Much of our focus, then, is on *the logic of inference* – on how best to draw robust conclusions, on how to justify our conclusions against actual or potential critics. ‘It came to me in a dream’ is not typically considered good methodology in political theory. Rather better is ‘I carefully distinguished freedom and autonomy, used thought experiments to test their relative importance, and engaged with comparative political thought to

see if these ideas fit non-Western cultures.’ True, some scholars will disagree with methods like thought experiments, just as some social scientists reject statistical analysis or ethnography, say: healthy disciplines see disputes about methods. But there are principles of good practice in statistical analysis and ethnography for social scientists who want to use these methods, and principles of good practice in thought experiments for political theorists who want to use this method. Each chapter in this book outlines such principles.

Our book’s key contribution, then, is practical guidance on what to do and what to avoid in the methods you may use in political theory. Since your methods affect your answers, how-to guidance should help.

2 What Is the ‘How-to’ Approach?

Each author has placed ‘how-to advice’ – sometimes obvious, sometimes not – in bold type. Some chapters spread the advice through the text; sometimes it is more concentrated. After reading a chapter, you can flick through it looking only at the advice in bold and remind yourself how to apply that method.

Consider the method of thought experiments, where we imagine situations that help us probe moral or political problems. Is medical experimentation on humans ethically wrong? We could try to answer this by seeing how we react to the idea of Nazis experimenting on people in concentration camps. But this particular example will probably bias us against medical experimentation. To answer the question more reliably, we should consider medical experimentation in less extreme cases, without Nazis. ‘Be sensitive to possible narrative-framing biases’ is Brownlee and Stemplowska’s advice in the thought experiments chapter. This may seem obvious, but many published thought experiments have such biases. Learning to spot this will improve your own reasoning and help you criticize some existing arguments.

A second example comes from the textual interpretation chapter, where I write: ‘indicate how confident you are in your interpretations.’ We can never know for sure what Marx meant by ‘class’ or why Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*. If two explanations are plausible but one is better supported by the evidence, we do not help our readers by pretending that one is definitely right while the other is undeniably wrong. This advice may seem obvious, but such indications of uncertainty are not common in published research on textual interpretation.

We are not presenting a neutral handbook: all of our prescriptions are contestable. Indeed, we want them to be contested. Being explicit about

how-to principles will hopefully clarify the issues, stimulate debate, and advance research in political theory.

3 Why Use a 'How-to' Approach?

There are five main reasons for a 'how-to' approach. First, and most mundane, students and academics often have to discuss methods in dissertations, PhD proposals, funding applications and so on. A better developed methods literature will help us compete with other researchers. You can explain to readers if you are using consent contractualism, fairness contractualism or rationality contractualism; conceptual analysis as resolution, extensional analysis and/or disambiguation; normative, historical, interpretive and/or critical comparative political thought; and so on.

Second, 'how-to' analysis helps us answer 'why do' questions: understanding how to apply a method can help us decide whether to use it, in at least three ways. One way is where we avoid a method because we wrongly think that it cannot be implemented. For example, realist political theory has often been criticized as overly negative, lacking a constructive programme. By showing – at last! – how to do realist political theory, Jubb's chapter in this volume strengthens the case for realism.

Another way in which 'how to' addresses 'why do' is where we wrongly think that a given approach is not how we do things and thus not what we should do. My chapter on textual interpretation partly targets historians who see philosophical analysis as something for political theorists and philosophers. But when we see how we actually interpret texts, we find that everyone does philosophical analysis: historians should thus learn how to do it well. Hamlin's chapter argues that since many of us do positive political theory without realizing it, we should recognize this, and do it better. Frazer's chapter on moral sentimentalism sees the abstract, rationalistic nature of much political theory as a fairly recent invention. Great political theorists like Hume and Smith often took sentimentalist approaches, as does Rawls in some respects: sentimentalism is not alien to political theory.

But the most important way in which 'how to' helps us answer 'why do' is where people wrongly reject a method in general due to particular applications of it: such criticisms can evaporate if we see how to apply the method better. Examples in this book include some objections to rational choice theory discussed by Kogelmann and Gaus, some challenges to reflective equilibrium answered by Knight, and some doubts about thought experiments considered by Brownlee and Stemplowska.

Third, how-to guidance helps us avoid mistakes. Olsthoorn's chapter on conceptual analysis notes that some arguments try to make normative points by definitional sleight-of-hand. It is better to define concepts more neutrally and argue for the normative position separately. Schmidt's chapter on realistic idealism criticizes act-utilitarians for being curiously inattentive to consequences, focusing on utility maximization without considering unintended consequences. Too many political theorists, he suggests, emphasize thought experiments at the expense of empirical research, wish away the problem with overly idealized depictions of human interactions, or recommend massive state powers without considering corruption. Kogelmann and Gaus note that rational choice analysis can be undermined by not distinguishing between parametric and strategic situations.

Fourth, and closely related, how-to guidance can strengthen our arguments. Goodin's chapter gives many tips for writing and structuring papers. Brownlee and Stemplowska explain how thought experiments help us test abstract principles. Ackerly and Bajpai show comparative political theorists the value of looking beyond elites and beyond texts. Leader Maynard notes that ideological analysis may help us grasp the real-world effects of some normative principles.

Fifth, how-to analysis can help us improve methods and thus contribute to the four points just raised. This is a key aim of our book, which both summarizes good practice *and* contributes to these techniques. Knight rejects Rawls's view that the key judgements in reflective equilibrium are judgements held with confidence. Quong distinguishes three types of contractualism in terms of five dimensions of contractualism. Ackerly and Bajpai support all four types of comparative political thought, against those who want to restrict it to one type. My chapter argues that previous methodological discussions of textual interpretation have largely overlooked the principles of good practice that actually drive good research.

4 Historical Reflections

Of course, debates over methods have always been important in political theory. Plato's *Republic* can be read as highlighting the weaknesses of Socrates's method and the strengths of Plato's new method, 'dialectic' (Reeve 1988: 4–9, 21–3). Machiavelli scorns abstract Platonic theorizing: we should 'concentrate on what really happens', because a prince who follows 'theories or speculations' will 'undermine his power rather than maintain it' (Machiavelli 1988: ch. 15, 54). In other words, empirical observation gives us more guidance than theoretical conjecture about what works and what does not.