

IS POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY IMPOSSIBLE?

Thoughts and Behaviour in Normative Political Theory

Jonathan Floyd



CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL THEORY

Series editor: Ian Shapiro

Can political philosophy ever reach conclusions or does it just go round and round interminably? Is it, simply, impossible? Jonathan Floyd argues that indeed it is impossible with current methods. He has a solution: normative behaviorialism. Erudite, well-argued and controversial, this book is a must-buy for anyone interested in political philosophy.

Keith Dowding, Australian National University.

This is a fresh, inventive and deeply reflective approach to what political philosophy is capable, and incapable, of delivering. Dr Floyd argues meticulously for the need to jettison the principled preconditions of a broad spectrum of philosophical arguments. Instead, he holds, we should excavate our behavioural responses in the real world from which to derive political guidelines as members of our societies. In bold and erudite fashion, this book carves out valuable new space in a field some believe to be overcrowded.

Michael Freeden, University of Oxford.

Jonathan Floyd is a Lecturer in Political Theory at the University of Bristol. He has written widely on questions of method and justification in political philosophy and is co-editor of *Political Philosophy versus History* (Cambridge, 2011).

Cover photograph: Peter Horree / Alamy Stock Photo

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ISBN 978-1-107-45052-3



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FLOYD

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Jonathan Floyd

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
4843/24, 2nd Floor, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, Delhi – 110002, India
79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107086050

DOI: 10.1017/9781316091081

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First published 2017

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-107-08605-0 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-45052-3 Paperback

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Is Political Philosophy Impossible?

Political philosophy seems both impossible to do and impossible to avoid. Impossible to do, because we cannot agree on a single set of political principles. Impossible to avoid, because we're always living with some kind of political system, and thus some set of principles. So, if we can't do the philosophy, but can't escape the politics, what are we to do? Jonathan Floyd argues that the answer lies in political philosophy's deepest methodological commitments. First, he shows how political philosophy is practised as a kind of 'thinking about thinking'. Second, he unpicks the different types of thought we think about, such as considered judgements, or intuitive responses to moral dilemmas, and assesses whether any are fit for purpose. Third, he offers an alternative approach – 'normative behaviourism' – which holds that rather than studying our thinking, we should study our behaviour. Perhaps, just sometimes, actions speak louder than thoughts.

Jonathan Floyd is a Lecturer in Political Theory at the University of Bristol. He has written widely on questions of method and justification in political philosophy and is co-editor of *Political Philosophy versus History* (Cambridge, 2011).

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As the twenty-first century begins, major new political challenges have arisen at the same time as some of the most enduring dilemmas of political association remain unresolved. The collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War reflect a victory for democratic and liberal values, yet in many of the Western countries that nurtured those values there are severe problems of urban decay, class and racial conflict, and failing political legitimacy. Enduring global injustice and inequality seem compounded by environmental problems, disease, the oppression of women, racial, ethnic and religious minorities, and the relentless growth of the world's population. In such circumstances, the need for creative thinking about the fundamentals of human political association is manifest. This new series in contemporary political theory is needed to foster such systematic normative reflection.

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Disclaimers and Debts

This book is written in a spirit that hovers somewhere between scepticism and fallibilism. That is, although I think there are truths to be had, as regards the issues under discussion, I do think it's very hard for us to have certainty about those truths, or at least for me to have them. Channelling Mill, I offer up my arguments as a contribution to a wider debate, in which I may well turn out to be wrong. Channelling Popper, I offer them up as claims we might learn something from, even if they are falsified.

I say this here because I often wonder about the gap between the research some people publish and the way they teach their students, given that the latter task requires one to do justice to the variety of views found in the discipline, and not just to the view of the teacher. I wonder of some people, how can you teach our subject as it stands, given what you say about the way it is standardly practised? How can you teach X, Y, and Z, given what you have said about them in A, B, and C? For my part, I will certainly continue to encourage, say, the analytical dissection and evaluation of concepts, as well as the working up and over of thought experiments, despite what I say in this book about (what I take to be) the limits of those experiments. I write here then, not just with a sense of fallibility about my own arguments, but also a great deal of respect for what might be called conventional analytical political philosophy, as well as a commitment to continue to teach it as it stands. Perhaps that is obvious, and such disclaimers are as unnecessary here as they are in, I suppose, many other books, given, as I say, the apparently comfortable gap between what other people write and what they teach. Nevertheless, lest these notes of fallibility and respect not be implicit in what follows, I make them explicit here.

Or one might put all of this quite differently. My hope is simply that the following book helps us to think about how we do, and how we ought to do, political philosophy, regardless of whether my own positions on these issues are either correct or widely adopted. A contribution to methodological clarity, then, offered up amongst a community of clever co-seekers for the truth – that is all I aim for.

Now for the more conventional bit. I have many people to thank here, starting with my wife, Rita Floyd, on whom I lean and from whom I learn. This book is dedicated to her, along with the son and daughter we've made together – marvellous Corin and delightful Arwen.

Outside of the private sphere, my thanks go far and wide. First, I want to thank my PhD supervisor, Alan Ryan, who watched over early work on this topic, and who was always kind, helpful, positive, and informed about whatever it was I was beavering away at (and writing too much about – a bad habit early on in my PhD thesis was to write, say, 30,000 words on a topic, only to end up shrinking that material down to around, in one case, about 2,000 words). Second, I want to thank the two figures who examined that thesis – Michael Freeden and John Horton. These again are generous and learned individuals – broadly interested, in a world that rewards specialisation, and always kind, in a world of too many prickly characters.

Third, I want to thank the many (many!) people who sat through one or more presentations on one or more parts of the argument of this book. This group includes audiences at various settings in Oxford, but also invited talks at ANU, the British Academy, Doshisha, Exeter, The Historical Institute, Keio, Kyoto, Leeds, the LSE, Sheffield, Sydney, UCL, and Yale, as well as the 2010 American Political Science Association annual convention, the 2012 International Studies Association annual convention, and the 2012 Manchester Political Theory workshops. Special mention goes to those whose comments and questions I remember receiving, whilst sincere apologies go to those whom I have forgotten altogether. As for the former, they are: Alice Baderin, Richard Bourke, Chris Brooke, Kimberley Brownlee, Dan Butt, Dario Castiglione, Jonathan Dean, Keith Dowding, Derek Edyvane, Stefan Eich, Sarah Fine, Miranda Fricker, Liz Frazer, Michael Freeden, Ed Hall, Iain Hampsher-Monk, Kei Hiruta, Matthew Humphries, Kimberley Hutchings, Jeremy Jennings, Rob Jubb, Rob Lamb, Seth Lazar, Andrew March, Shmulik Nili, Philip Pettit, Anne Philipps, Enzo Rossi, Quentin Skinner, Julia Skorupska, Matt Sleat, Graham Smith, Nicholas Southwood, Marc Stears, Ken Tsutsumibayashi, Laura Valentini, Daniel Viehoff, Jeremy Waldron, and Dominic Welburn.

Fourth, I want to thank those whose teaching left a considerable mark on me. In addition to being a guiding light to me as a theorist, the late Brian Barry was a kind and supportive advisor whilst I was at Columbia, as well as someone who once took me out for lunch just in order to encourage me to apply there in the first place. These kinds of efforts, invisible to line managers, as well as the many metrics by which we are now measured, really stick with you. Even more importantly, Peter Starie and Wolfram Kaiser, both of Portsmouth University, were instrumental

in ensuring that I had any sort of career at all as a post-graduate, let alone one that led to this book. I am forever in their debt for the faith and support they offered me early on, at a time when I had only just found my vocation.

Fifth, I want to thank the two anonymous reviewers for Cambridge University Press whose positive, extensive, and searching comments helped make this book what it is today. If it is still not the book it could have been, then that is no fault of theirs, as they provided me with all the pointers and rebuttals I needed. Similarly, it is no fault of my editor, John Haslam. This is the second book of mine, and the first by my hand alone, that he has guided through the publication process. I am very grateful to him for his support, and especially so given that this book, unlike the first, arrived almost two years later than planned. This delay stemmed from the winning combination of a new home, a new job, and a new child, not to mention a long commute, and I am very grateful to John for not once rushing or pressuring me through this period. I hope such faith is rewarded, at least a little bit, by the pages that follow.

Sixth, I want to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council, St. Hilda's College, Oxford, University College, Oxford, and especially the British Academy for funding different parts of the research process that led to this book. All of these institutions provided generous support and expected little in return by way of paperwork – a rare treat these days. I am grateful that they put their trust in me, and have tried to do justice here to the resources they invested.

Finally, I want to thank my students, both at Oxford and now Bristol. Provided one doesn't have too much of it at any one time, I relish teaching, and do genuinely learn, both from putting teaching material together, and from the responses students give to it. Perhaps I would learn less if I knew more, but I know little, and so learn lots.

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Introduction

What Is This Book About?

Think how natural it is in philosophy to begin an argument about what we *should* think with a claim about how we *already* think. One example of such a beginning is the previous sentence. A second example is the inference that because we would save a boy drowning in a nearby pond if we could do so at little cost to ourselves, we should donate money in order to save starving children on the other side of the world. A third is the inference that because we do not think wealth and privilege should influence our choice of political system, we should live in whatever system would be chosen by an individual who did not know what place he or she would come to occupy within it. In this book I argue that the method expressed by these moves does not work, at least in political philosophy, because the pre-existing thoughts it tries to turn into political principles are too messy and inconsistent to be utilised and ultimately systematised in the desired fashion. There are, I claim, no hidden or buried political principles of the right type and pedigree expressed or entailed by the many twists and turns of human thinking. Instead, we should derive political principles from actions, not thoughts. Although I cannot say in this book that actions always speak louder than words, I do say that certain types of action, including certain types of political and criminal action, speak more clearly than any type of thought, and can be treated as grounds for political principles in much the same way as political philosophers currently treat the latter. This means that just as we would consult the diners and not the chef in order to assess the quality of a meal, political philosophers should pay more attention to the behaviour of real citizens than to the reflections of other political philosophers when assessing the quality of different political systems. It also means that rather than thinking about *what we think we would do* in different hypothetical choice situations, political philosophers should think about *what we already do* in different political environments (and note that the previous sentence invoked an analogy for illustration, not an inference for justification).

These claims, of course, provide only a partial flavour of the book, not a description. This is to be expected. Even the best descriptions are partial, which is why in this introduction I want to offer several. The first and best of these is also the most general. It runs as follows. This book is a work *of* and *about* political philosophy. It is a work *of* political philosophy just insofar as it provides an answer to the question ‘how should we live?’. It is a work *about* political philosophy just insofar as its chief focus is the particular method by which political philosophers have traditionally attempted to answer that question. As far as descriptions go, that is a good one to be starting off with, even if it already begs a number of questions, including most obviously the question of why the question ‘how should we live?’ should be seen as the key one for political philosophy. But we will get to *that* question soon enough. If it helps, we can say for now simply that this is a book about both how politics should be organised and how political philosophers should argue about how it should be organised.

A second way of describing this book is to describe it in terms of its key ideas. There are three of these, with three chapters to match. The first of these is *the impossibility thesis*, the idea that political philosophy seems impossible to do despite being impossible to avoid. It *seems* impossible to do just insofar as it seems impossible to provide a convincing and meaningful answer to the question ‘how should we live?’. It *is* impossible to avoid just insofar as it is impossible for groups of human beings to avoid living in accordance with one or other such answer, regardless of whether the principles expressed by that answer have been agreed upon, regardless of whether they have ever been made explicit, and regardless of whether they be libertarian or egalitarian, or anarchist or authoritarian in nature. Because we always live with other human beings, however distant those others might be, we are always living under one or other political system, regardless of how unsystematic that system might appear to be.

The second idea is *mentalism*, the idea that the right way of doing political philosophy involves, most fundamentally, the derivation of convincing and meaningful political principles from purported patterns in our normative thoughts, by which I mean patterns that are claimed to exist in the way that we think about both what should and should not be the case in the world and what should and should not be done within it. This idea is developed in the form of two arguments. The first of these is that mentalism is the dominant method in political philosophy. The second is that mentalism can never succeed because the thoughts it tries to turn into principles are too inconsistent both within and between different individuals. Taken together, these arguments serve to explain just why it is that political philosophy appears impossible to do in the manner described by the impossibility thesis.