



Political Philosophy's Methodological Moment and the Rise of Public Political Philosophy

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Abstract

Political philosophy is having a methodological moment. Driven by long-standing frustrations at the fragmentation of our field, as well as recent urges to become more engaged with the 'real' world, there is now a boom in debates concerning the 'true' nature of our vocation. Yet how can this new work avoid simply recycling old rivalries under new labels? The key is to turn all this so-called methodological interest into a genuinely new programme of 'methodology', defined here as the careful identification and evaluation of all the different methods of reasoning available to us as political philosophers. This programme would clarify, for the first time, all the many ways in which we might argue with one another, thus making us less likely to talk past each other, and more likely to work fruitfully together.

Keywords Political theory · Methodology · Public political philosophy · Rhetoric · Political realism · Political science

Introduction

A house divided cannot stand, but it can certainly argue. Egalitarians and libertarians in the kitchen, unable to agree on the division of labour for tonight's family dinner. Democrats and liberals in the lounge, unable to agree on suitable viewing for tonight's family television. Cosmopolitans and statisticians in the study, shutting their ears to such domestic squabbles, yet unable to agree on even the simplest boundaries in their own shared space, especially since being told by their employers to 'work from home', wherever that might be. And these are just the *friendly* rivalries — siblings operating on a shared floor, and with more in common than they like to admit.

In the rest of the house things really fall apart, with distant mutterings and slammed doors a now familiar but *staccato* backing track to our theoretical life, echoing at times the polarised politics of the wider world outside. This is the hum and buzz of realists in the basement, sticking to the foundations, and moralists in the attic, reaching for the sky; of continentals in the bedrooms, artfully putting on their make-up,

and analytics in the bathroom, vigorously scrubbing it all away; but also the rest of us, doing as best we can in those liminal zones of landing, hallway, and stairs. For us, it's the subtle art of blending approaches without antagonising peer-reviewers, as feminists, multiculturalists, critical theorists, and every ism-less hybrid in between, sometimes tilting to facts and sometimes principles, sometimes contexts and sometimes universals, sometimes thinking historically and sometimes globally. Such open-plan working can be a grind, of course, but it's not the harshest fate on offer. Being evicted would be much worse; not being admitted in the first place the worst of all.

Imagine then what would happen if, one day, an outsider came to political philosophy's front door for the first time, hearing the hubbub within, as they take the steps up the porch, and hoping to learn something — as we all do in this collection — of the 'state of the art' that produces it. What would *they* make of it all? What would they make of *us*? And would they, somehow, see *method* in our madness? Perhaps so, if they glimpsed some overarching goal that is well served by such creative pluralism, animating the house from the outside though we do not always see it within, or if they saw a family that is slowly coming together rather than painfully growing apart, or if they saw us as helpful neighbours, with valuable skills for those around us. Yet they might see something else, if they looked a little less kindly and a little more honestly. They might see, in truth, that there are really *multiple methods*

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at play here. This is because, deep down, our house is one in which we talk past each other because we talk in different ways. Or, put differently, one in which at least some of the rivalries and misunderstandings that bedevil us stem not from irreconcilable aims, but from unspoken disagreements over the forms of reasoning we use to pursue them.

Let us call this view, from now on, the *methodological* explanation of our current plight, and let us note, straight away, that although it is a less optimistic view than the three more charitable interpretations mooted, it does have one signal advantage over all of them, which is that, instead of just wishful thinking, it suggests a timely and potentially rich programme of scholarship: a programme of *methodology* in political philosophy, understood here as the judicious identification, analysis, and evaluation of all the various methods of argument available to political philosophers.

This work is timely, in part, because of the noted fragmentation of our house, but also something more recent, as well as more distinctive of the current *zeitgeist*: the *methodological moment* political philosophy now finds itself in, as produced by the cumulative work of a wide range of scholars, all of whom have become deeply engaged with questions regarding the overall nature and purposes of our discipline. From ideal versus nonideal theory (Hamlin & Stemplowska, 2012; Erman & Möller, 2022), to moralism versus realism (Rossi & Sleat, 2014; Rossi, 2019), to transcendental versus comparative theory (Sen, 2009), all the way through to ‘political’ political theory (Waldron, 2016), our subject has never been more preoccupied than it is right now with general questions of orientation, as well as more precise questions concerning, say, fact-independence (Ronzoni & Valentini, 2008), practice-dependence (Sangiovanni, 2008), action-guidance (Valentini, 2012), and the gap between perfect utopias (Estlund, 2019) and real contexts (Modood & Thompson, 2018).¹ So, we are divided, sure, but not dumbstruck; lacking harmony, undoubtedly, but not noise. What we have on our hands is an impasse, but also an opportunity: to gather up these new ideas, to organise them into a new field of enquiry, and then to use that field, with a bit of luck, to change the way we currently talk both to and past one another.

This, at least, is the hope of the programme of methodology proposed here, and it can only be a hope for now, given how many new and previously unasked questions it gives us. These include how many methods our subject really has, when they are helpful, and how they differ from those found in moral philosophy and political science. They include whether we should really be labelling, as ‘methods’, such diverse items as realism, contextualism, data-mining, conceptual analysis, reflective equilibrium, and normative behaviourism (Perez,

2020). And they include, on the back of these initial enquiries, where exactly philosophical reasoning diverges from political rhetoric. For example, if a philosopher deploys a moving thought experiment about a child drowning in a pond (Singer, 1972), whilst a politician recounts the parable of the Good Samaritan (Spencer, 2017), what precisely is the difference? Or, from a different angle, if a philosopher makes their case for socialism by telling a folksy story about how we would or should behave on a camping trip (Cohen, 2009), is that not emotive analogical rhetoric, just as much as it is clever analogical reasoning? And indeed, if that same scholar entitles their book with what we’d normally call a ‘rhetorical’ question — ‘If you’re an egalitarian, how come you’re so rich?’ (Cohen, 2021) — is that not, again, a sign that the line between cold-blooded philosophy and hot-blooded politics is less clear than we might hope? We might decide here, of course, that there is a degree of acceptable overlap, but also that some methods are just too manipulative for sober prose, though fine for catchy book titles, yet either way, we first need to know exactly what these methods are and how they work. That is, we first need to do the *methodology*.

There is though something of a paradox here, or at least a little irony, bearing in mind that one of the driving forces behind this recent methodological moment, as witnessed in the literature just noted, has been an urge to make our subject more *practical*. How exactly does that urge square with the claim made here that we should now turn, at least initially, to the kind of *meta*-theory often thought of as indulgent navel-gazing? The truth is that this is unavoidable. We simply cannot rush, in the name of rights or racism, let alone relevance, from contemplation to coercion — not if we want there to be any cogency to it, let alone consent. First, we get our house in order and then, maybe, we think about ordering others. Methodology is a pre-requisite, not a panacea: a first, not a final stage, for those with wider political ambitions. Or, put differently, it is a necessary though naturally insufficient step towards strongly ‘practical’ or ‘political’ political philosophy of the much-desired kind, setting the scene for world-shaping interventions without making them directly itself. And that is just fine. Its mission is simply to ease us away from the babble of our current House of Babel, and towards not just better conversations, but also better collaborations, including with those in the non-academic world beyond. If it manages that, it would be more than enough to be going on with. In the language of an earlier *zeitgeist*, it would be the *kehr* out of our current *methodenstreit*, giving us an exciting body of work for now and a significant one for the future.

The key task then, for the rest of this article, will be to show just some of this excitement, as a prelude to the full programme to come. This will be done in four stages. First, a careful mapping out of the methodological terrain that has so far only been illustrated via the issues mentioned. Second, a proposed framework for organising this terrain, building on

¹ Several edited collections have further helped to produce this moment, including Leopold and Stears (2008); Floyd and Stears (2011); and Blau (2017).

previous work on the same front. Third, a return to the theme of practical urgency, and thus one of the most pressing issues mooted earlier, of how we can separate rhetoric from reason in our methods, particularly when contemplating the rise of what I will call here ‘public political philosophy’. Fourth, some consideration of the future of methodology, stressing that it will need diverse hands as well as open minds. Note though that at all times here the aim is simply to provide plausible yet *provisional* suggestions regarding how this new research field might be organised. This is crucial, because although we need common terms of reference, if we are to move forwards, we also need a degree of flexibility, if we are to avoid ultimately slipping back into the kind of polarisation and mutual misunderstandings that currently dog our discipline.

Methodology as a Subject Area

The suggestion here, then, is that political philosophy needs to seize our current methodological moment and turn it into proper methodology. This means, above all else, working up a new research agenda concerned with setting out the various tools at our disposal, and evaluating them in terms of what they might do for us, whatever ends we have in mind. For example, what can we do, and not do, with thought experiments? How should we use facts, whether hard data or soft anecdotes, when pursuing principles, moral, political, or otherwise? How might we blend sociology, history, political science, moral psychology, anthropology, economics, and the burgeoning field of comparative political theory? And indeed, how can we do all this given that the issue is not just how we *might* use such materials in terms of the familiar tasks already being pursued in this ‘house’ we call political philosophy, but also how *useful* they might be when put to work in ‘real’ politics?²

We might wonder, after all, if that latter kind of work requires the same tools, though used in different ways and with different blends, or whether it somehow involves its own methods, which again we would need to investigate, and indeed master, if we want to change the world in line with our cherished principles. We also might worry about the fact that working with people as they are, rather than as we idealise them, brings an opposing pair of risks. On the one hand, we can become unduly conservative, simply reaffirming the status quo. On the other, we can become unduly radical, thus banishing ourselves to those ivory towers we all claim to shun. So, again, we need to get our methods straight if we are to have any hope of encouraging the kinds of political intervention required of our various theories of, for example, justice, democracy, rights, and so on.

² For valuable early work on some of these issues, see e.g. Leopold and Stears (2008); Floyd and Stears (2011); Dowding (2016); and Blau (2017).

This means, initially, getting the concept of *methodology* straight, by dividing it into the following two levels of enquiry. First, at the level discussed so far, we need to work out, in broad terms, what our subject involves, and then work out, in careful detail, all the various tools at our disposal, from thought experiments, to historical expositions, to opinion surveys, and beyond. Second, at a level to come, we need to develop a rich body of arguments concerning these very issues. In other words, as this new field grows, it will become not just a case of one or more individuals trying to work out, idiosyncratically, the modes and methods of our subject, but also of groups of scholars engaging in concert with a growing body of scholarship on just these issues. That, after all, is just what we would expect of any established field in political philosophy, or indeed any coherent research programme, and we want the same here of methodology.

What though, exactly, would *progress* look like here, bearing in mind these two levels? Ideally, of course, it would involve convergence and consensus on an increasing number of issues: perhaps on the variety of available methods, if not their value, or perhaps on the need to tailor our methods for different audiences, if not quite on how to manage this. Yet what if this does not happen? What if, instead, things become more fractious and rivalrous than that, as we might suspect? If so, and our eristic tendencies continue to match our analytical ones, then there could still be hope on the horizon. We need not despair, or fear we are returning to the babble described above, just so long as these new camps are sedulously defended and developed, and become established and suitably refined positions (and ‘isms’) in their own right. If this happens, then no matter the differences between these camps, they will still provide, when taken together, a useful set of resources from which all can learn and borrow, as well as, crucially, a new and common language capable of facilitating those productive conversations and collaborations we long for. Disagreement, in other words, is fine, just so long as it is clear and constructive.

On this note, perhaps, it is worth recounting something Onora O’Neill once noted of a set of responses to Christine Korsgaard’s *The Sources of Normativity*. ‘Needless to say’, she writes, ‘no unanimity has been achieved [here], but a vigorous approach to a set of topics that are central for ethics has been proposed, explored, and criticised’ (O’Neill, 2010, xii). Well, of course, it was *almost* needless to say as much in an academic philosophical context, given our propensity to engage with one another solely through critique, but even so, it is *always* worth remembering that there are different forms of critical disagreement that can develop over time in our profession, ranging from outright dismissal and rejection, at one end of the spectrum, to careful differentiation, and even more careful blending, on the other. The latter, crucially, is progressive, co-operative, and hopeful, without being dependent on everyone agreeing on everything. All it requires, at

root, is contributors working up their positions in good faith, presenting them to others with transparency, and judiciously refining and developing them as new alternatives and objections come along. This, again, should be our ambition with methodology.

One Possible Methodological Framework

Now, in order to encourage this ambition, rather than simply ‘calling’ for it, I want to propose an initial starting position regarding what political philosophy involves and how we might organise the methods at its disposal. Remember, this is just *one* viable view amongst several: a provisional offer for others to engage with. Nonetheless, the hope here, borrowing a distinction from Rawls, is that it helps us see the fruitfulness of the general *concept* of methodology described, however much we disagree over particular *conceptions* within it (Rawls, 1971). If scholars learn from it, use it, borrow from it, improve it, or develop alternatives that they believe avoid errors within it, then that’s all to the good. Methodology in political philosophy — and this is crucial — only has to be useful in the way that a DIY shop is useful. It does not matter whether we all buy identical tools for identical houses; all that matters is that methodologists set these tools out on display, as clearly as possible, and with appropriate advice on what they are good for, so that others can find, choose, and use them as best they see fit.

Here then is just one possible theory of future methodology in political philosophy, a theory that echoes many in the long tradition of Western political thought by having three key parts to it: (1) a general framework for our subject matter; (2) a set of three tasks serving that framework; and (3) a range of methods applicable to those tasks. These run as follows.

First, the general framework which holds that political philosophy should be defined not in terms of *ideals*, such as justice or legitimacy, or *institutions*, such as the state or government, but rather in terms of a *question*: ‘how should we live?’ This is an argument developed at length elsewhere (Floyd, 2011; Floyd, 2017A), but the key rationale for it is simple enough. In contrast to ideal-based or institution-based definitions, this question-based approach is both inclusive and exclusive to just the right degree: inclusive given that it can accommodate, say, libertarian and egalitarian work, or statist and cosmopolitan positions, without difficulty; exclusive given that it can be helpfully separated from equivalent questions for both the moral philosopher — ‘how should I live?’ — and the social scientist — ‘how do we live?’ As a result, with this framework in hand, we nudge the disciplinary dial away from competition and towards cooperation, making the domestic babble described above just a little less likely. And, at the same time, we delineate a subject, not just in which existing scholars can find a comfortable home, but also one to which

outsiders can be warmly invited, knowing that they are visiting somewhere that is usefully distinct from other academic houses in the neighbourhood.

Next, then, we have the idea that political philosophy can be divided into three distinct tasks, building again on a position developed elsewhere (Floyd, 2019). These three are *analysis*, *critique*, and *ordering*, with each working roughly as follows. Analysis, first, involves isolating and illuminating whichever concepts interest us when thinking about how we should live, including values such as freedom and equality. This maps out for us our basic working material. Critique, second, subjects those values to various objections, each of which might affect our willingness to promote them in the real world. This tests our working material, giving us a good initial sense of what it can and cannot handle. And then comes ordering. This third task involves drawing on the materials provided by analysis and critique in order to generate precise sets of political principles capable of guiding our concrete political preferences.³ Here, then, we aim to order our ideas in order to shape our political orders. All of which, when taken together, gives us three distinct tasks that are not just important, but also mutually *compatible*. Analysis, clearly enough, serves critique, which in turn serves ordering, though each can be pursued in isolation, depending on our interests, as well as the faith we have in our assumptions concerning the contents of the others. And this is crucial, bearing in mind our wider aims here. As with the general framework, it again encourages cooperation over conflict, because again it allows various projects in our subject to live alongside one another without the need to declare themselves the one true faith.

Finally, then, we have the claim that each task suits a different set of methods. Critique, for instance, can involve a charge of what we might call ‘problematic implications’, whereby a given idea has dangerous consequences, or a charge of ‘inconsistency’, whereby a given position has incompatible elements within it. Isaiah Berlin’s critique of positive liberty (Berlin, 1969), for example, is a case of the first, whilst Charles Taylor’s later critique of Berlin’s position (Taylor, 1979) is a case of the second. Similarly, ordering might involve a method of testing political principles against ‘considered judgements’ (Gaus, 2010, 174; Floyd, 2017a, 131–138), or perhaps our more abstract ‘intuitions’ (Appiah, 2008; Floyd, 2017a, 138–153) or perhaps a combination of both via ‘reflective equilibrium’ (Rawls, 1971; Daniels, 1979; Floyd, 2017b). It might even involve, looking at more recent scholarship, a new method of testing principles for real-world suitability proposed by De-Shalit under the label of ‘public reflective equilibrium’ (de Shalit, 2020; cf. Wolff, 2020).

³ Ordering thus has a dual meaning here. First, we order our thoughts, in the sense of organising all those political ideas to which we are attracted. Second, we produce a clear prescription of political order, in the sense of generating principles against which both contemporary politics and future proposals can be measured.

Again though, there are all *options*. Each of these methods, and others, can be experimented with, and each scrutinised by methodologists. We do not say here, then, that this or that is the *perfect* or *comprehensive* method. We say simply that, with political philosophy framed as an open-ended question, and divided into a friendly division of labour, let us try and look at all such methods with a little more freedom, fairness, and focus, than they normally receive, given that we are no longer trying to bundle them up with any one substantive position, from egalitarianism, to libertarianism, to communitarianism, and beyond.

So, once more, the conception offered here frames our subject in terms of the following: (1) a question; (2) a set of tasks serving that question; and (3) a range of methods serving those tasks. As a result, it maps out a terrain that we had previously only guessed or gestured at, relying on the knack and judgement of experience, or the examples provided by those we considered experts in our field. Now, by contrast, we can go well beyond such things. Building on the promise of this new field, we will soon identify and explore both smaller and larger features of our work than had been properly considered before.

We might, for example, start to give proper scrutiny to what often seems, rightly or wrongly, some kind of ‘master’ method in political philosophy, and indeed in much of academic enquiry beyond our borders: the method of arguing for our *own* position by arguing *against* the position of others. This is something, intriguingly, that Mill touches on in *On Liberty*, when approvingly quoting Cicero’s remark that *three quarters* of all arguments in moral, civil, and political matters are ultimately arguments against the alternatives and objections to our own case (Mill, 1989, 30). It is also something, equally intriguingly, that we typically adhere to *without comment* in most of our books and articles, not to mention the ‘literature review’ sections of most doctoral theses. Clearly, we instantiate it every day via norms of peer review, just as legal systems channel it with trials by jury. Yet what exactly does this mostly adversarial practice involve? What assumptions does it rest upon? And can it ultimately be justified without relying on itself? Perhaps, for example, this multi-purpose tool relies upon a deeper notion of expert ‘judgement’, whereby rejecting the ‘best’ positions on a given topic, such as justice, whilst our own view remains intact, gives the latter some kind of halo effect⁴? Or might it rest on ‘falsification’, borrowing from Popper, with progress in our field coming, not from proving new theories, but from steadily falsifying old ones (Popper, 1963)?

In any case, whatever the *truth* is of this method, or indeed the more particular ones practised under each task, and

⁴ On ‘judgement’, see for example the essays on John Dunn’s work gathered in (Bourke & Geuss, 2009). See also Rawls’ early work on the ambition of ‘explicating’ the judgements of competent judges, in e.g. (Rawls, 2013)

whatever the *extent* might be to which different methods can be used for more than one task, the key point remains that simply *having* a framework of the kind proposed, and looking carefully, as a result, at all these general and replicable forms of reasoning, outside of any substantive arguments over justice, rights, or legitimacy, can only be a good thing for our work. It leads to novel and potentially productive questions. It helps us get our thinking straight, so that communication, justification, and political applications are all enhanced. And it does this, crucially, even if we continue to disagree, not just about those substantive issues, but also the merits of each of these tools. All that really matters here, for most of us, is that we start to share a better collective understanding of the methods at our disposal; all that really matters, for the methodologist, is that their work supports this collective understanding. It is enough, for this new field, to identify and illuminate the tools at our collective disposal, without prescribing the end to which they should be put. If we can separate and display them, with clear labels and neat boundaries, our job is more than well done, without pre-empting the jobs of others.

Reason, Rhetoric, and the Hybrid Art of Public Political Philosophy

The argument so far has taken us from a general concept of methodology to a particular conception of how it should be organised. This opens up a range of fertile topics, including the aptness of that conception, but also, and more importantly, the details of the methods it illuminates. Of all these methods, however, one cluster in particular stands out as a useful illustration of the value of this new field: a cluster that I will refer to, from here on in, as the art of ‘public political philosophy’.

This art really matters to methodology, and for at least four reasons. First, because of the noted practical ambitions behind much of our subject’s recent methodological moment, from ideal vs. non-ideal theory, to moralism vs. realism, to ‘political’ political theory, and beyond (Floyd, 2010; Floyd, 2020). Second, because we clearly need to work at this art, not just in order to meet those ambitions, but also to meet the growing requirements of our funding bodies, most of whom now push ‘engagement’ or ‘impact’ as conditions of their various fellowships and audits (just as they once, notably, pushed ‘methods training’⁵). Third, and more importantly, because its workings remain unclear, despite being well illustrated, in recent times, by charismatic scholars such as Anthony Appiah, Martha Nussbaum, and Michael Sandel. Fourth, and most importantly

⁵ Though with more success, on that front, in the empirical social sciences than was ever had in normative corners of the humanities, and it remains the case that most students and scholars of political theory/philosophy merely gesture at ‘methods’ talk in their essays, dissertations, and applications, without really knowing what is wanted of them. Supervisors are thus regularly asked: ‘Cannot I just say I’m going to be reading texts and arguing about them?’.

of all, because it is not even clear, if we mastered such workings, what *success* on this front would actually look like.

We could, for example, just bow here to whatever the latest intellectual and institutional pressures are to be ‘relevant’, and then say that *any* method of argument is good if it serves that end. If so, ‘good’ public political philosophy could be measured in likes, views, re-tweets, and so on. Yet that cannot be right, given the principled demands of our various theories, and there are clearly pros and cons to different kinds of ‘relevance’. On the one hand, sure, getting things right could lead to a wider audience and better world, but getting them wrong could be disastrous. Superficiality, undue deference, excessive conservatism, unintended legitimisation, hollow virtue signalling, and the steady marginalisation of any topic without immediate practical ‘benefit’ — these are just some of the risks we incur when reaching out to the public via *The Times*, *TedX*, or *TikTok*.

Given these dangers, then, how might methodology get a handle on this art? Perhaps, as a first step, by looking critically at some of the language used in this very article. Consider, for example, the various *analogies* deployed so far, from houses to tools to DIY stores. Or consider, once more, Singer’s famous thought experiment involving a child drowning in a pond whom you could rescue if you chose, though it might cost you a suit, or at least a hefty dry-cleaning bill (Singer, 1972). What is going on with these analogies? As methods of argument, are they innocent illustrations or something more substantial? At root, do they function as thought experiments, allegories, case-studies, or something else? And, most importantly of all, do they help or harm our pursuit of a better world?

Clearly, knowing the answers to these questions would be a good start when it comes to understanding, and mastering, public political philosophy. It would help us begin to divide progressive techniques from those likely to backfire. It would help us separate short-term attention-grabbing from long-term cultural change, and thus ‘relevance’ from ‘significance’. And it would help us, in turn, draw a careful line between the wider mediums of philosophical reasoning and political rhetoric, meaning we could then better distinguish serious scholarship from the kind of cheap put-downs found in election campaign posters, in both our own arguments and the arguments of others.

This will not, however, be easy work, and not just because of institutional and political pressures to ‘cut through’ and ‘make a difference’, or indeed our own biases on particular causes, but also because of ingrained writing habits. How we write, who we write for, and the way in which we blend prose and polemic — these are all highly developed traditions involving a whole range of methods of reasoning. Consider, for example, that just as political philosophers use analogies ad nauseum to build their cases, they also use *reductio ad absurdum* to demolish their opponents’.⁶ Like novelists, they

depict utopias and dystopias for both critical and constructive purposes.⁷ Like lawyers, they constantly argue *against* as a means of arguing *for* — as noted earlier. So, of course, the line between professional and polemical argument matters here, and yes, if we can get it right it will help us master public political philosophy to good effect, but it will not be a quick conceptual split. It is, instead, a serious, long-term methodological project, covering various methods and confronting various interests. Or, more analogically, it’s a project worth getting our teeth into, but hardly bite-size.

Again though, how we might *start* to move this work forward? Well, perhaps by taking just one plausible interpretation of the ‘logic’ of the analogies just discussed and then applying it to the problem at hand. That is, if we assume that analogical reasoning is something like reasoning from *case-studies*, with inferences drawn accordingly, what we *could* do here is study some of the better known instances of where public and philosophical argument cross paths in order to work out which methods best serve our purposes — and indeed in order to work out, as noted, just what our purposes should be here in the pursuit of ‘success’, ‘relevance’, ‘impact’, and so on. We might, for example, look at someone like Iris Murdoch, thinking about fiction and philosophy. In her case, novels serve as a unique space to explore ideas, as well as to share them far and wide. Or we might look at Cicero, as a philosopher, lawyer, *and* politician. In his case we find public political philosophy taken to the highest possible level, as well as reflections on the proper place of rhetoric in republics, though also an awkward caveat, at least for today’s professional theorists — the caveat that ‘true’ wisdom here requires considerable practical experience, especially when it comes to the merits of Romans over Greeks.

These cases, however, though clearly meriting future methodological scrutiny, are still not the best at hand for now. Instead, for our purposes, it would be better to look at *contemporary* political philosophers, working in *our* institutional and intellectual culture, and doing their best to blend what seem to be these rival imperatives of truth and power. On this front, several candidates come to mind, including those three mentioned earlier — Appiah, Nussbaum, and Sandel. Better still, though, would be three thinkers who have both stepped into the political realm *and* philosophically reflected upon that very step — Amartya Sen, Onora O’Neill, and Jonathan Wolff. With each of these cases, we can ask: What methods have they deployed? Have those methods led to them going too far or not far enough? And how might we combine the approaches they have both articulated and practised in order to master this hybrid art of ‘public political philosophy’?

⁶ A ‘method’ which Raz once claimed was significant precisely because it lacked presuppositions (Raz, 1999, 367).

⁷ On this note, Rorty once wrote of the importance of novelists like Dickens, given that they, more than theorists such as Marx, really bring home to people things like the ‘exploitation’ and ‘alienation’ of capitalism (Rorty, 1989, xvi, 146–149).

Let's detail each of these in turn, starting with Sen, whose theoretical work on utilitarianism, democracy, justice, and development, including collaborative efforts with Martha Nussbaum on the 'capabilities' approach, led famously to the United Nations' Human Development Index (HDI) (Sen, 2001). More recently, he has also shed light on the jump from theory to practice by developing a 'comparative' approach to justice that focuses our attention, echoing Judith Shklar, more on immediate injustices than the pursuit of perfect utopias (Sen, 2009; Shklar, 1990). On this view, intriguingly, and building on his earlier work, eliminating dictatorship is more important than perfecting democracy, just as ending famines is more important than achieving equality. It is though for that earlier work that he is most widely known, leading not just to a Nobel Prize in economics, but also a National Humanities Medal from a President who was in turn occasionally described as a modern 'philosopher-king': Barack Obama. This medal, aptly, was awarded for the application of 'philosophical thinking to questions of policy'.⁸

Second, we have O'Neill, whose long-standing research on Kantian ethics informed not just pioneering theoretical arguments on 'idealisation' (O'Neill, 1987), in similar territory to Sen's recent writings, but also public intellectual contributions on 'trust' (O'Neill, 2002), as well as a broad portfolio of policy work as a Member of the House of Lords.⁹ This work ranged from banking reform to media regulation, and has taken place alongside both more traditional and more public-facing intellectual activity, including most recently on the ethical challenges of pandemics (Niker & Bhattacharya, 2021). It also consistently provided not just an expression of certain core philosophical skills, but also an expression of a particular view on public political philosophy, as articulated in her *From Principles to Practice* (O'Neill, 2018). On this view, the key role for the aspiring Cicero is not to try and dictate perfect policy, as if one had a captive or perfectly willing audience, but to produce careful yet accessible arguments, involving explicit principles and transparent inferences, so that democratic publics can make better, or at least more informed, decisions themselves.

All of which takes us to Wolff, whose early work on abstract theories of justice led not just to more 'applied' theoretical publications on the ideas of disability and disadvantage (Wolff, 2009), but also a rich body of work on various councils and committees, as well as, most recently of all, an illuminating distillation of how best to go about this activity in *Ethics of Public Policy* (Wolff, 2012). Here, drawing on policy-review experience across rail

safety, drug reform, gambling controls, and more besides, Wolff follows O'Neill in advocating the careful presentation of arguments for and against different policy options, with meticulous and explicit reference to the principles involved, as well as cautious reflections on how attractive those principles might be, and where they might lead if left unchecked. He also shares an approach that encourages us to shed philosophical light on issues as and when they acquire political salience, regardless of whether they are academic hot-topics, which is why he too has commented on the ethics of pandemics and lockdowns, alongside more 'traditional' theorising.¹⁰ Again then, there is a consistent focus here on enriching rather than controlling conversations, though that too, perhaps, is encouraged by political rather than academic fashions, if it is indeed true that polarisation has now supplanted apathy as the great danger of modern democracies.¹¹

Clearly, there is much to learn from these thinkers. Zooming in on their methods, we see them deploy, for example, conceptual analysis (of democracy, trust, risk, etc.), analogies to real and hypothetical examples (from Indian famines to imaginary train crashes), and the careful mapping out of inferences between principles and cases, verging at times on a public form of reflective equilibrium.¹² Zooming out, we see their explanations of why such methods are appropriate for public political philosophy, and in particular the principled limits that O'Neill and Wolff have set themselves in such work. As noted, these two prefer to *explain* the connections between theory and practice, or more precisely between principles and policies, without for the most part *prescribing* to their democratic audience. The dilemma is *x*, they tend to say; the choices *y* and *z*. Success, on this view, is measured in clarity, consciousness, and culture, not policy or popularity. The role of the public political philosopher is simply to illuminate options, enrich debates, nuance conversations, and indeed democratic deliberations, *without* having to pick sides, in the sense of strongly aligning oneself to any particular party or policy.

Is this approach, however, just a bit too *timid*? Yes, it can look like wise and patient politics, but also convenient deference. After all, if these authors have the *truth* about banking, disability, gambling, and so on, should not they push a little harder? Should they not, perhaps, tell the public that *this* is what philosophy *shows*, or *proves*, even if not all philosophers agree with them? Maybe so, though presumably a key worry here is that such an approach could easily backfire, leading to

⁸ <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/DCPD-201200095>.

⁹ For the details of this work, see here: <https://members.parliament.uk/member/2441/career>

¹⁰ See: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/01/new-risk-social-contract-covid-ethics/621246/>

¹¹ For popular rather than philosophical commentary on this shift, see e.g. (<https://bpr.berkeley.edu/2019/04/13/the-positives-of-political-polarization/>) or (<https://www.ft.com/content/5655ab7c-1152-414e-bd22-67acd06c5c51>)

¹² Rawls' distinction between three kinds of reflective equilibrium is interesting here, though it was never fully developed (Rawls, 2001, 30–31).

less influence for them, and perhaps even intellectuals or ‘experts’ in general.¹³ Nonetheless, there is *also* the danger here that just by *taking part* in debates, processes, and policy reviews, our illustrious political philosophers give weight to particular policy outcomes, even *when* expressing disagreement with them. Consider, for example, the case of Jeremy Waldron, as ‘Chichele chair of Social and Political Theory’ at Oxford, when commenting on the Leveson enquiry into media regulation in the UK.¹⁴ Here, as with any contributor, it is easy to ‘note’ his contribution without addressing it, and thus easy to treat him as a ‘consultant’, or even a ‘co-author’, without having to take his view on board. And indeed, that becomes even easier the *more* scholars one involves, because when so many diverse voices are gathered up in such ‘enquiries’, there is little pressure on the enquiry chair to bow to any one of them, though every reason to boast, upon finishing such work, of all the great and the good whose thinking ‘informed’ the finished product.

This worry, then, about unintended collusion, is a serious one, and it leads in turn to a second — the worry that perhaps the real ‘methods’ that matter in this realm are not really to do, after all, with *what* is said, but rather *how* and by *whom*. Of course, we *all* wring our hands about how to square the philosophical imperative of truth with the public imperative of impact, but the reality might be, not just that easier influence sometimes comes from deviations from the truth, but also that it depends on the right form of delivery. We know full well, after all, that political triumphs often flow simply to those who are seen by their audience as the most competent or trustworthy voice on stage, regardless of the ‘real’ merits of their arguments on the issue at hand. Or, put differently, we know full well that, regardless of their *methods*, persuasive people persuade us, whether through objective credentials or personal charisma. Yes, it might also be true that, at least sometimes, charisma flows from the possession of a clear set of core principles, held with certainty and expressed with clarity, yet some people, it seems, just *sound* or *look* right to the audience at hand, whatever the quality of their mind-set. They speak the right way; make the right jokes; hold themselves in just the right posture; and so on and so forth.

What though, if anything, can those of us who are awkward philosophers do about this awkward fact? Presumably not very much, at least when it comes to changing it. Yet that does not mean we cannot work around it, and again, perhaps individual case-studies offer a way forward, especially when provided by thinkers who have come even closer to the front line

of politics, without being the front man or woman themselves. Here, for example, we might look at William Galston’s work with Clinton, or Philip Pettit’s work with Zapatero, or Yael Tamir’s work in the 15th, 17th, and 19th Knessets. Or, better still for our purposes, we might look at Marc Stears, drawing on his time as Chief Speechwriter to Ed Miliband, the then Leader of the Opposition in British Politics.¹⁵ Stears, notably, mirrors Galston in being an adherent to the ‘new realism’ in political theory, though how exactly that shapes his politics is unclear. What is clear is that his role here saw him combine, at one stage, (1) the latest political theory on ‘pre-distribution’ with (2) contemporary anxieties over the cost of living, into (3) a prize-winning speech that called for, amongst other things, an energy price cap.¹⁶ As a result, his public-political-philosophical work provides a case-study, not just in combining abstract theory with pressing policy choices, but also the kind of rhetorical flair we presumably need if we are to be sufficiently persuasive.

So what exactly does this case tell us? Well, as with Anscombe and Cicero, there is obviously much that needs to be scrutinised here by future methodologists. And, as with Sen, O’Neill, and Wolff, there is obviously much to emulate. Clearly, Stears joins a long line of political philosophers, from Aristotle and Averroes to Mary Warnock and Bernard Williams, who have managed to alter, in various ways, the wider flows of public discourse. Nonetheless, for now, there is a much harsher lesson that needs to be taken on board by anyone hoping to find the right methods of public political philosophy. Out there in the ‘real world’, it took just one widely shared picture of Miliband ‘trying’ to eat a bacon sandwich to do more harm than any philosophical thought experiment ever could when it came to winning power for this new and principled policy-platform.¹⁷ Out there, in the cut and thrust of *ad hominem* politics, it took just one clever campaign poster, involving a visual analogy of Miliband sitting ‘in the pocket’ of the Scottish National Party’s leader, Alex Salmond, to do more harm than any think-tank paper ever could on the merits of devolution, no matter how careful its conceptual analysis.¹⁸

¹⁵ For a good example of how Galston can combine political experience with philosophical theory to reach non-academic audiences, see here: <https://newbooksnetwork.com/political-rhetoric-and-political-experience-with-william-galston>. For an extended treatment of Pettit and Zapatero’s work together, see (Martí & Pettit, 2012). For the details of Tamir’s work in government, see here: <https://main.knesset.gov.il/en/MK/APPS/mk/mk-personal-details/697>

¹⁶ This was first mocked, and later adopted, by the government of the day. For a useful overview, see: <http://justice-everywhere.org/democracy/an-interview-with-marc-stears-beyond-the-ivory-tower-series/>

¹⁷ See e.g. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/ed-miliband-bacon-sandwich_n_5bbe27b0e4b01470d0580898

¹⁸ See e.g. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/mar/13/spin-it-to-win-it-what-does-that-miliband-salmond-poster-tell-us-about-the-battle-of-the-political-brands>. Note also the effect of the same imagery on David Steel, a generation earlier: <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/uk-world-news/wife-of-david-steel-blames-tv-1094162>

¹³ O’Neill has written extensively on this issue, in terms of the decline in ‘trust’ in public life, as well as in response to misinterpretations of a remark once made by Michael Gove in the context of the 2016 ‘Brexit’ referendum. See e.g. <http://whentheexpertsdisagree.ucd.ie/trust-speaker-preview-onora-oneill/>

¹⁴ For the details of Waldron’s statement, as well as the wider report to which it contributed, see here: https://discoverleveson.com/evidence/Witness_Statement_of_Professor_Jeremy_Waldron_redacted/11462/media

So, although it remains true that the public can be moved by informed debate, and that there are more and less dangerous ways of our trying to gain their attention, there is clearly no silver bullet for public-minded philosophers. Whether one likes it or not, messengers matter, not just messages; images matter, not just intellects. Naturally, the public like clear policies with clear rationales, but they like them most of all when offered by people they already find likeable.

All of which, then, seems to put us back in the quandary we started with. How can public political philosophers play with fire without getting burnt? How can they ‘do’ politics without sliding into petty point-scoring? And how can they shape public debate without presenting only our most populist ideas via our prettiest philosophers? Well, here is a cautious suggestion. Drawing on all these cases considered so far, perhaps the key point is that we should not forget what we do well in order to try and do everything. We should not, that is, become too ‘political’ (Waldron, 2016; cf. Finlayson, 2015), just as academia, in general, should not become too ‘activist’. This is because, if we stop being distinctively cautious and abstract, we lose our unique purpose, and indeed our claim to the resources and audience we *already have*, as opposed to those extra readers, listeners, and viewers we might reach for in the pursuit of ‘impact’. From Sen and O’Neill, to Wolff and Stears, the best cases of public political philosophy seem to suggest not just a handy quiver of methods worth borrowing, but also a careful remit worth following — a remit that helps us enhance debates, as well as the reputation of our subject, without adding to the forces of ‘polarisation’ and ‘post-truth’ already out there. Of course, we will always be tempted to exceed this remit, given the confidence of our convictions, and indeed the severity of the injustices that anger us, but we should hold fast, at least as long as we are presenting ourselves as analysts rather than actors. Failing to do so, as in the recent politics of Covid, would make us something like politicians pretending to be scientists, asserting judgements as truths when what we should be doing is explaining choices as trade-offs. Again, we cannot do *everything*, so should do well the thing that is both unique to us and valuable to others. This means illuminating options and arguing for them accordingly, knowing at all times that that final verdict is not *for us*, but for those in power, and indeed those who vote for them.

So, on the one hand, let us not try to control debates or pre-empt outcomes. That comes across as liberalism trying to end democracy, with populism kicking back harder, and intellectuals banished to the margins. On the other, let us not stoop so low as to simply tell people what they already think or hear. That again makes us irrelevant, and not now because we are ahead of our time, but because we are quickly outmoded. Regardless of our personal appeal, we should be Daedalus not Icarus; sweet-spot sages, or goldilocks gurus, practising the astute moderation of the Aristotelian mean. By all means, then, deploy the rhetorical methods of alliteration, contrastive

pairs, and analogies found in the previous sentence, yet remember that even when *well* deployed, you might still go unheard, or heard and disagreed with, or even widely agreed with yet still on the losing side of the crucial vote or decision due to wider political dynamics. And why should that be otherwise? The public, after all, are long used to not getting what they want when their representatives have other ideas, whether on borders, taxation, or the death penalty. Philosophers should accept the same with equanimity, resisting the temptation to throw the baby out with the bathwater, and dropping precision or patience in the pursuit of perfect justice or legitimacy. So, no sulking or venting on Twitter, if possible, and no besmirching too quickly the abilities of voters or those they vote for, especially if you know, deep down, just as Plato knew, close up, that you do not want the reigns and responsibilities of power yourself.

Here then, in summary, are our two conclusions regarding methodological reflection on public political philosophy. First, that it is well practised when aimed at better public deliberation, as opposed to perfect political outcomes, and when deployed via particular methods that serve this end, including hypothetical and real analogies, the conceptual analysis of ‘hot’ topics, and the casuistry of mapping out implications between cases and principles. Second, and more broadly, that methodology here clearly *matters*, both in the sense of raising interesting questions and in the sense of helping us meet at least some of the practical ambitions of our recent methodological moment. And again, this is just the *start*. In the future, there will be new methods to consider, new cases to examine, and new risks and possibilities to map out. Would political philosophers, for example, have more impact if they worked humour into their thought experiments? Would they have more relevance if analysing the judgements of voters a little more, and the intuitions of philosophers a little less? Would they acquire more authority, or even charisma, if organised into committees and institutions, producing enquiries and reports as formal associations rather than as a free-wheeling diaspora of intellectuals?¹⁹ Of course, there would be risks and trade-offs with each of these choices too, but that is not the point. The point is that they provide rich material for future methodology.

Where Next?

Over the coming years, methodology in political philosophy will need to develop carefully over the two ‘levels’ described earlier. That is, it will need new and refined proposals for how to organise and ‘conceptualise’ its subject matter, as well as new and refined analyses of all the many methods at our

¹⁹ Just as methodology might get more attention, and thus resources, if organised into a ‘standing group’, ‘research network’, or even just an acronym, whether PPM (Political Philosophy Methodology?) or MPT (Methods in Political Theory?), which is why all three are now being pursued.

disposal, including those applicable to public political philosophy. This, in turn, will bring yet further issues and methods to light, but also, with a bit of luck, something else. In time, whilst establishing methodology as a new 'room' within our subject's 'house' (perhaps a well-lit conservatory?), it will also, hopefully, start to change the atmosphere in the rest of the building. This is because, as we become a little wiser about the different ways in which we argue, we also become less likely to misunderstand or mistrust each other, and in turn more likely to widen and deepen our subject's conversations.

We will though, clearly, need an attitude to match this ambition. Just as public political philosophers need to illuminate and offer, without insisting or berating, so do methodologists need to map and display, without dictating or demanding. Methodology quickly outruns its purposes, not just if it specifies what justice is, or what utopia looks like, but also if it stipulates too rigidly what our subject involves, or how many methods it contains. Provisionality, experimentalism, and fallibility are all key watchwords here. In the short run, they stop us closing ourselves off into babbling rivalries; in the long run, they open up new vistas. These will include, no doubt, some of the methods of argument discussed earlier, but also as yet unimagined. As with technology and politics, we should soon see here what Popper called radical conceptual innovation (Floyd, 2009), meaning that although we could guess at future work on, for example, the methodological uses of artificial intelligence, or the best forms of public political argument in the 'multiverse', we cannot predict it. And indeed, why would we want to? Uncertainty keeps subjects interesting and scholars curious. We can then happily leave the tracking of such developments to future historians, or perhaps another group altogether. Perhaps those future philosophers who have just been asked, as we have here, to reflect upon the latest 'state of the art' in this old subject of ours.

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