

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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Is Political Philosophy Impossible?

*Thoughts and Behaviour in Normative
Political Theory*

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University of Bristol



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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.

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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.