

## 1 Introduction: A ‘How-to’ Approach

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### 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

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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.

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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.

Hobbes uses as little empirical observation as possible to derive normative principles. If we get the methods right, he argues, we will all agree about politics. The key is reason, which for Hobbes means applying deductive logic to clearly defined concepts (Hobbes 1991: 4.4, 25–6; 4.9–13, 26–9; 5, 31–7). This shows, for example, that monarchies and republics have the same amount of liberty (1991: 21.8–9, 149–50). Hobbes mocks the prevailing methods of political argument, such as quoting classical authors to support claims (1991: 5.22, 37; 25.12, 180).

Poor methods lead to insufficient authority, thinks Hobbes (1990: 2–4), or to excess authority, for Bentham and Mill (Bentham 1843: 13, 495; Mill 1989: 1.4–7, 8–12; 3.13, 66–7). All three writers dismiss intuitionism – justifying normative claims by consulting our instincts, feelings and non-inferential reactions to normative problems (Hobbes 1994: 6.8, 42; Bentham 1996: 2.11–16, 21–31; Mill 1989: 4.12, 84). Rousseau disagrees: morally pure men can look inside themselves and see what is good. Conscience is a better philosopher than reason, he writes in *Emile*, and we only need reason when conscience fails us (Rousseau 1979: book 4, 286, 289–90). This from the man who told a recently bereaved woman that she was luckier than Rousseau: she had only lost her husband, but poor Rousseau had also lost her friendship (Cranston 1997: 87–8). We are lucky that we are not as morally pure as Rousseau.

Although Rousseau defends moral intuition, his *political* arguments are not justified by appeal to intuition. Indeed, the draft of *The Social Contract* treats intuition as inappropriate in modern society (Rousseau 1997: 1.2.6–14, 154–7). Rousseau's political method is broadly contractarian, alongside Hobbes, Locke, Kant, Rawls and Habermas: a normative position is justified if all specified agents do or could accept it under certain conditions (Darwall 2003). The precise version of this idea varies markedly among these writers, but the general method is strikingly different to that used by writers like Burke, who opposes abstract reasoning and justifies political actions through prudence, necessity, expedience and experience (e.g. Burke 1999: 228, 237–8, 280–1). But Burkean justification is now rare in academic political theory.

The twentieth century saw considerable innovation and progress in methods (Wolff 2013). Many of these developments underpin the chapters in this book. Strikingly, though, much political theory still seeks what Plato and his predecessors sought: conceptual clarity. What does X mean? How do X and Y differ? Analysis of equality, for example, has changed hugely in the past twenty-five years because of new distinctions – between equality, sufficiency and priority, between deontic and telic egalitarianism, and so on. Many people who saw themselves as favouring equality now realize that they favour something else. This has not solved

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the normative debates, but it has changed the picture and led to better answers.

This brief historical overview does not imply that good methods ensure universally accepted answers or that progress is impossible without a how-to handbook. But methods have clearly been important in political theory from the beginning, and a how-to handbook could thus bring this key issue into sharper focus and foster further development.

## 5 The Scope of This Book

I should briefly discuss the key terms in this book's title. I will also touch on what and whom this book has left out.

Obviously, this book's title is somewhat misleading: a more accurate title would have been *Methods, Methodologies, Techniques and Approaches in Analytical Political Theory (To The Extent That We Can and Should Distinguish Analytical and Continental Political Theory Anyway)*. But even if that fitted on the front cover, no one would read the book. Mill, criticizing the 'utter unreadableness' of the late Bentham, wrote perceptively that Bentham 'could not bear, for the sake of clearness and the reader's ease, to say, as ordinary men are content to do, a little more than the truth in one sentence, and correct it in the next' (Mill 1974: 114–15). I have said a little less than the truth in the title, and corrected it here.

I will not specify what 'methods' are, although some chapters do diverge somewhat from mainstream understandings. For Quong, contractualism is a method and not, as some people think, a substantive position like utilitarianism or deontology. My chapter on interpreting texts argues that supposedly different methods in history of political thought are not different methods: scholars have thus overlooked some core principles that apparently different methods share. My chapter is thus more about methodology (seen as the logic of inference) than methods; Frazer's chapter, in contrast, is more about an approach and its techniques than a method and methodology.

This book treats 'political theory' very broadly. In effect, we cover political philosophy, moral philosophy, normative jurisprudence, positive political theory, history of political thought and more. But we concentrate on 'analytical' political theory, not 'continental' political theory. This distinction is questionable, of course, but roughly, we can associate analytical political theory with the work of such writers as G. A. Cohen, Ronald Dworkin, Hobbes, Frances Kamm, Mill, Martha Nussbaum, John Rawls, Quentin Skinner and Jeremy Waldron, and continental political theory with the work of such writers as Theodor Adorno, Judith Butler, William Connolly, Michel Foucault, Hegel, Nietzsche,

Richard Rorty and Slavoj Žižek. There is huge variety within these camps, of course; some writers, like Jürgen Habermas and Bernard Williams, arguably fit in both camps; and not all of these names would classify themselves like this. Nor do all authors in this book.

Miller and Dagger (2003: 446–9) outline five principles of analytical political theory: (a) it is essentially separate from deep metaphysical questions about the meaning of human life, (b) it involves conceptual clarity and argumentative rigour, (c) it is normative, (d) it addresses a plurality of competing values, and (e) it 'aims to serve as the public philosophy of a society of free and equal citizens who have choices to make about how their society will be organised.'

I do not believe we need principles (d) and (e). More importantly, principle (c) only entails normative political theory, whereas this book is wider. What did Locke mean by 'man'? Why did Tocqueville write what he wrote? These questions are essentially empirical. Was Hayek a conservative? Does Arendt have a positive conception of liberty? These questions are both empirical and conceptual: we infer Hayek's and Arendt's beliefs, then compare them to criteria of conservatism and positive liberty, respectively. What is equality? Do liberty and power overlap? These questions are fundamentally conceptual. Do Hobbes's laws of nature follow necessarily from his premises? Would Rawls's principles of justice differ if we changed the motivations of people in the original position? These questions could be normative, but are in essence exercises in logic and conceptual clarity. I see no reason to exclude these questions from analytical political theory.

But ultimately, it does not matter whether you agree with this view of analytical political theory. Nor does it matter whether you see yourself in the analytical and/or continental camp, or even as something different. All that matters is whether some of this book's guidance helps you.

Although I sought a wide coverage for this book, there are gaps. We have nothing on international political theory, for example, or on how political theorists should use empirical research in history and social science. Such gaps will be criticized, and rightly so. I have some excuses here, but not for the paucity of women authors – only four out of seventeen. When I started inviting authors, it was men who tended to spring to my mind and to the minds of most of the men and women I sought advice from. Only late in the day did I see the effects of this implicit bias. Around the same time I was struck by a perceptive comment on the *Feminist Philosophers* blog, which notes that while it might seem arbitrary to invite a woman to speak at a conference just because she is a woman, it is also arbitrary that many of us tend to think of men when we are asked who the leading figures in a field are. I've tried to change my thinking and my

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actions after reading the *Feminist Philosophers* blog, the *Being a Woman in Philosophy* blog, and the edited book *Women in Philosophy* (Hutchison and Jenkins 2013). But this came too late to have much effect on the line-up of authors. Mea culpa.

So the range of authors is not representative; we have not covered all of political theory, or even all of analytical political theory; and the title is a bit of a lie. But what we have is still an exciting venture that seeks to do something new and important: the first book that seeks to explain how to do much of political theory.

## 6 Overview of This Book

Robert Goodin's short introduction on **How to Write Analytical Political Theory** offers concise, practical tips on writing clear and effective analytical political theory. Goodin gives advice on such issues as structure (e.g. organization = argument), techniques (e.g. distinctions = arguments) and the process of writing and revising (e.g. don't overreact to advice).

Kimberley Brownlee and Zofia Stemplowska's chapter on **Thought Experiments** covers imaginary scenarios such as John Rawls's original position and Nozick's experience machine. For thought experiments to be useful, the chapter argues, they must be philosophically respectable and argumentatively relevant. We need not avoid 'crazy' or 'wacky' thought experiments: indeed, if we understand how-to issues properly, we see that wacky examples can be beneficial, for example by highlighting the limits of our conceptual and argumentative structures.

Carl Knight's chapter on **Reflective Equilibrium** explains and develops John Rawls's influential approach to moral justification, by which we try to reach an accord between our principles and our judgements. Knight rejects Rawls's view that judgements should be confident: Knight prefers judgements to be considered. Knight also challenges Singer's objection that some judgements are emotive, evolutionary responses: this is something to feed into the reflective equilibrium process, rather, to see if some judgements are unreliable. Knight offers a step-by-step guide to the process of reflective equilibrium: we should list the main contending principles, test those principles with cases, revise principles, and so on. Knight exemplifies this with an example from his own work, showing how he came to support a combination of luck egalitarianism and prioritarianism.

Jonathan Quong's chapter on **Contractualism** denies that contractualism is a specific position, like utilitarianism or deontology. Rather, it is a method by which we consider what idealized agents would or could

accept under certain specified constraints. Or to be precise, contractualism is a family of three methods. Consent contractualism asks what people would freely consent to, even if we cannot ask them (as when considering the coercive authority of the state). Fairness contractualism asks what is fair, even if people would not consent to it (as when card players discover during a game that a card is missing: since some players will be doing better than others, we might mistrust their actual, self-interested views about what to do). Rationality contractualism asks what is instrumentally rational for people to do, whether or not they consent, whether or not it is fair. Each type of contractualism involves different answers to five key questions, such as what agents' motives and interests are. Much confusion comes from defenders and critics not adequately distinguishing these different contractualisms.

Michael Frazer's chapter on **Moral Sentimentalism** argues against the overly rationalistic nature of most modern political theory – cold, abstract and with too many trolleys. Yet there is ample evidence that our normative judgements rest in part on emotions. Frazer thus argues that we should draw not just on reason, but also non-rational faculties of the human mind, including emotion, imagination and the imaginative sharing of emotion through sympathy or empathy. He looks to philosophers like Hume and Smith, who engaged their readers with stories and examples. Moral sentimentalists should replace technical terminology with the evocative language of everyday life. They should move from empathetic assessment of particular cases to more general principles, not vice versa. And they should beware their own biases by considering multiple perspectives: your assessment of alleged police injustice will be stronger if you have considered the perspective of the police, not just the policed.

Robert Jubb's chapter on **Realism** discusses the realist critique of ideal theory. Realists like Bernard Williams criticize Rawls and others for being overly reliant on general moral claims that neglect the distinctive character of the political. Politics should come first: realists urge political philosophers to pay more attention to how political institutions and actors produce or fail to produce a particular set of goods in response to a particular set of problems, and to consider how this should constrain their theorizing. Jubb disagrees with Williams that only liberalism can adequately answer our basic legitimation demands: various solutions are possible, and realists should not fall into the trap of themselves being overly moralistic by appealing to values whose contestation is actually a key part of the problem. Realists should also engage with particular political circumstances, developing a finer sense of real political possibilities and motivations.

David Schmidtz's chapter on **Realistic Idealism** also criticizes Rawls for starting with justice. The first virtue of social institutions, rather, is to enable peaceful cooperation. Schmidtz's criticisms of ideal theory are different to Jubb's but complementary. Schmidtz criticizes ideal theorists who assume away the problems they try to solve. An ideal solution is one that works with actual agents, not one that would work with idealized people: we should focus not on a kingdom of ends, but a kingdom of players. While the political theorist's job is to some extent to say how the world should be in the grand scheme of things, actual governance is the art of compromise in a world that is not a blank canvas. Realistic idealists should thus focus less on abstract thought experiments and engage more with history, political economy and empirical insights about the behaviour of actual human beings.

Johan Olsthoorn's chapter on **Conceptual Analysis** starts, as one would expect, with careful conceptual analysis of 'conceptual analysis'. Olsthoorn distinguishes between concepts and terms, between concepts and conceptions, between principles and criteria of application, between different types of concepts and between different types of conceptual analysis. He offers advice on defining and naming concepts, and on comparing/contrasting interpretations of concepts advanced by different writers. Olsthoorn also highlights the limitations of what conceptual analysis can contribute to normative argument. While conceptual analysis helps us clarify ideas, make distinctions, and keep separate ideas apart, disagreements over competing normative ideas are not usually resolvable by conceptual analysis alone.

Alan Hamlin's chapter on **Positive Political Theory** treats positive political theory as a kind of model, like a map of the London Underground – abstracting, simplifying and idealizing aspects of the real world in order to highlight and systematize key features of a process, institution or argument. For example, in considering whether voting should be compulsory, we might make assumptions about low turnout leading to unequal turnout, leading to differential policy impact and so on. Being clear about such assumptions, even if not in the published version of an analysis, can help us think through the relevant steps. In particular, we can use 'sensitivity analysis' to test the relative importance of various factors, changing one factor at a time to see how it affects our conclusions. Would compulsory voting be more or less desirable if, say, unequal turnout did not affect policy? Since many of us do this kind of thing informally, Hamlin recommends that we should learn to do it well.

Brian Kogelmann and Gerald Gaus's chapter on **Rational Choice Theory** explains why political theorists should take rational choice theory