Chapter 1: Doing Political Philosophy

Summary:

- In this chapter, we offer some remarks about how to do political philosophy.
- We identify the main aims and focus of the discipline, which centre on the moral claims at the heart of political arguments.
- We describe two tools in the practice of political philosophy. One of these involves arranging arguments in clear and organized terms, and the other involves the use of examples and thought experiments in the analysis of moral claims.
- We discuss how to employ these tools in the service of a political argument.
- We conclude by reflecting on the importance of these lessons for what follows in the rest of this book.

1. Introduction

Learning any new task is difficult. When someone first throws a dart, it's likely to miss the board. When she starts to play the piano, it's hard to have both hands in the right place at the right time. When she begins a new language, it takes a while before it's possible to have even a simple conversation. Political philosophy is no different.[1] At the outset, it may be daunting. But it's also like these tasks in another respect. With some introduction, it's possible to learn the ropes swiftly and, pretty soon, it can become second nature. It's our aim in this chapter to open the door to this – to give the reader an idea what political philosophy is all about, and to provide some tools to get going.

The chapter runs as follows. In section 2, we describe some of the main aims of political philosophy, showing that we can make progress with the subject by studying arguments about the justifiability of various public policies. In the remaining sections, we discuss three features of this task. In section 3, we comment on *which* arguments political philosophers might consider. In section 4, we look at *how* to engage with these arguments. We emphasize the importance of two tools: arranging arguments in a format that clarifies the claims on which they rely, and using examples and thought experiments to assess them. In section 5, we explore how to deploy these skills. In section 6, we bring these elements together with some reflections on taking the next steps in political philosophy.

By no means do we aim to provide a complete commentary. There are several other useful methodological tools that political philosophers might employ, and the discipline can usefully draw on the insights of several closely related fields of study. We'll flag some leads of these kinds as the chapter proceeds, and we close with some suggestions of further reading.

Recognizing that we can't do justice to the full range of matters, the aim here is merely to introduce the subject, as well as to explain some of its common tools. Most importantly, this chapter provides some guidance on how to read and understand what follows in this

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[1] Political philosophy is sometimes known as political theory, and some scholars use these terms interchangeably. For simplicity, we'll stick with political philosophy.

book and to begin engaging with political philosophy. In short, our aim is to provide a starter kit for a first expedition.

2. What is Political Philosophy?

Politics is rife with disagreement. We take it that this claim is uncontroversial. But for evidence, we can consider the table of contents in this book. It lists fifteen areas of public policy, all of which are the subject of heated debate. We disagree about whether physician-assisted suicide should be legal; when, if ever, humanitarian intervention in other states is justifiable; and what conditions, if any, someone without work must meet in order to claim unemployment benefits.

Some of these arguments about *empirical claims*. These kinds of debates are about how things are, including the relationship between various factors. For example, one fear with legalizing physician-assisted suicide is that it'll increase the likelihood that an individual will be pressured by others into ending her own life. Disputes about this practice might arise because we disagree about the size of this risk, perhaps because we've different interpretations of the available data.

But not all disagreement is about empirical claims. To see this, let's imagine that we agree that the evidence clearly shows that legalizing physician-assisted suicide won't increase the risk of an individual being pressured by others into ending her life. Nevertheless, disagreement might persist. There may be dispute about whether it's ever morally permissible to commit suicide or for a physician to assist with this. Advocates of legalization might contend that it's up to the individual to decide whether to live or to die. They might hold that she's the right to choose for herself. Meanwhile, opponents might argue that suicide disrespects to the sanctity of life and that the state shouldn't condone it, let alone permit medical staff to aid and abet it. These aren't disputes about empirical matters. They're disagreements about how things should be because they're disagreements about the values, aims, and ideals that should guide public policy. They're arguments about *moral claims*.

It's sometimes thought that politics is all about empirical claims. It'll help to clarify this point with an example, so let's consider the policy of making unemployment benefits conditional on their recipient actively seeking work. Supporters of this policy might attempt to justify it by appealing to the idea that making unemployment benefits unconditional will result in shirking. This is to assert the following:

> *Empirical claim*: Making unemployment benefits unconditional will cause more individuals to refuse or avoid work.

In the public arena, debate about unemployment benefits often proceeds with exclusive focus on this claim, with disagreement centring on whether or not the available evidence supports it. Indeed, some think this is perfectly reasonable, holding that disagreement in politics should be all about empirical claims. After all, they're testable. They can be

verified. In contrast, perhaps there's no way to test moral claims. Maybe they can't be proven or disproven.

It's worth making three points about this reasoning. First, whatever the merits of these ideas, identifying the distinction between empirical claims and moral claims is important. As we'll show, separating them along these lines is useful for making clear exactly what ideas are involved in an argument, as well as how to evaluate them. Even if someone's view rests on only an empirical claim, it'd remain worthwhile to identify this claim, and to subject it to careful analysis. Considerable research has been undertaken around the empirical matters involved in many political arguments. It's important that we consult this research, and explore what it supports.

Second, it's a mistake to think that political arguments can rely upon empirical claims alone. Again, the example of unemployment benefits can make this clear. As a case against making these benefits unconditional, the components of this argument that we've identified so far are as follows:

> *Empirical claim*: Making unemployment benefits unconditional will cause more individuals to refuse or avoid work.

> *Conclusion*: The state shouldn't make unemployment benefits unconditional.

But there's something odd about this. The conclusion clearly involves a moral judgement. It's a position about how the state *should* act. But this is strange. How has the conclusion assumed this form, when it's derived from a claim that's strictly empirical? The answer is that this is an error. A conclusion with moral content can't be derived from purely empirical claims. As David Hume put it, we can't derive an 'ought' from an 'is'.[2]

The way in which many political arguments avoid making this error is that they rely on unspoken moral claims. For example, an opponent of unconditional unemployment benefits might in fact have in mind the following:

> *Moral claim*: The state shouldn't enact policies that cause more individuals to refuse or avoid work.

> *Empirical claim*: Making unemployment benefits unconditional will cause more individuals to refuse or avoid work.

> *Conclusion*: The state shouldn't make unemployment benefits unconditional.

This argument no longer makes the mistake of deriving an 'ought' from an 'is'. Because it now contains a moral claim, we can reach a conclusion about what the state should do. But it's important to notice that it escapes the error only for this reason. So, while it may be common to believe that empirical claims are all there is or should be in politics, arguments can't avoid relying on moral claims.

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[2] David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1739]), book 3, part 1.

This leads us to a third point. Not least because they're an indispensable part of any political argument, it's crucial that we assess its moral claims. To see this, let's consider a different claim:

Alternative moral claim: The state should enact policies that cause more individuals to refuse or avoid work.

If this claim is correct, the critic of making benefits unconditional has a problem. Since her argument relies on the exact opposite of the alternative moral claim, its truth falsifies her conclusion. Indeed, it implies that the state should adopt entirely different policies. Given that so much hangs on which moral claims are correct, it's vital that we subject them to analysis.

Here, we've arrived at what political philosophy is all about. One of its main aims is to make the terms of political arguments precise, and to arrange them in an organized fashion. When someone takes the view that the state should make unemployment benefits unconditional, political philosophers want to know what claims they offer to support this conclusion. We look to distinguish empirical claim from moral claims, and to lay out the argument neatly.

Having done this, the next task is assessment. We might give some attention to the empirical claims. In so far as political philosophers are keen to know whether an argument is forceful, it's important to determine whether the available evidence supports any relevant empirical claims. It's in this way that political philosophy connects with political science, as well as with a broader range of fields, including economics, sociology, and psychology.

But, political philosophers are mostly concerned with exploring the moral claims of an argument, and the relationship between its claims and its conclusion. It's here that the discipline connects to other parts of philosophy, particularly moral philosophy and logic. Methods from these fields provide useful insights about how to assess moral claims and the coherence of a line of reasoning. Political philosophy uses these tools to scrutinize political arguments.

3. Which Arguments?

Political philosophy involves considering political arguments. But this raises a question: *which* ones? In politics, as in so many areas of life, there's no shortage of arguments, all with different claims and conclusions about what we should value and what justifies the exercise of political power. How do we choose which views warrant our attention?

It's difficult to offer comprehensive guidance on this issue, but it's useful to make two points about how political philosophers approach the matter. First, we tend to emphasize the moral issues at the heart of political arguments. Sometimes, this means setting aside certain concerns. As we'll acknowledge at various points in this book, it's not always possible to discuss everything that's relevant to, say, whether the state should ban hate

speech or have more open borders. Instead, we aim to engage with the moral claims at the centre of political debate about them.

Second, political philosophers focus on the most forceful things that can be said about these issues. The reason for this is simple. The best way to determine how to exercise political power is to consider the best arguments in favour of the various options, and to see which of these is the strongest.

Identifying which arguments are the most forceful isn't simple. Even after years in the discipline, it's easy to make mistakes about this. But we can note two points about how best to proceed. One is to avoid generalizations about views. It's an unfortunate feature of contemporary politics that so many arguments target 'a party line' or the leanings of 'the left' or 'the right'. It's an even more unfortunate feature of both public and academic political discussion that so much is written in relation to 'isms' – liberalism, socialism, and so forth. This is a shame partly because such generalizations can be misleading. For example, they can associate liberals with free markets, or socialists with big government, even though some who identify as liberal are sceptical about free markets, and some who identify as socialist endorse decentralized political systems. Because of this, generalizations can create unhelpful divisions, obscuring what matters in political decision-making. This isn't whether arguments or their advocates are liberals, socialists, free marketeers, governmentalists, or otherwise. What matters is the plausibility of the claims made in support of particular courses of action.

In the light of this, we suggest that it's normally best to start with the actual arguments offered by political philosophers and others involved in politics. It pays to consider their reasoning so as to get a handle on what can be said in support of various positions. This isn't to suggest that we should focus exclusively on these arguments. Sometimes, a view points in the right direction, without getting the details exactly right. To work with this fact, it's important that we make a charitable interpretation, considering the claims of others in their best possible light. But we might need to go beyond this, by adjusting their views slightly to make them as strong as possible. By building on the political arguments of others in these ways, we're likely to find the arguments most worthy of analysis.

4. Analysis in Political Philosophy

Across this book, we aim to familiarize the reader with two methods that political philosophers often employ to assess political arguments. As we indicated in the introduction, we can't discuss all of the available tools in the kit.[3] We'll set aside the task of conceptual analysis, where political philosophers aim to define and to delineate concepts, such as liberty and equality. We'll also set aside other methodological tools that are used to analyse moral claims. To consider all of these ideas in an introduction to political philosophy would be overwhelming.

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[3] For further discussion, see Adrian Blau (ed.), *Methods in Analytical Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Instead, we'll focus on two tools that are both commonplace and easily accessible. One is a structure for presenting logical arguments, often known as a syllogism. The second is examples and thought experiments that are designed to test, modify, and justify moral claims.

4.1. Argument Structure

A syllogism is an argument that involves two claims that are supposed to lead to a conclusion. We can arrange all political arguments in this format. A virtue of doing so is that it can help us to see their terms very plainly. This is especially valuable since a common difficulty in assessing arguments is that the claims on which they rely are unclear, as is the relationship between them. Stating terms precisely makes things transparent, and this allows us to bring the argument into better focus.

Another important virtue of a syllogism is that it allows us to see one way in which to challenge an argument, namely by identifying errors in its logic. Let's consider the following argument against affirmative action, a version of which we discuss in chapter 5:

> *Moral claim*: The state should compensate any individual who's suffered wrongful discrimination.

> *Empirical claim*: Affirmative action fails to compensate all those who've suffered wrongful discrimination.

> *Conclusion*: The state shouldn't adopt affirmative action.

This argument brings to light a genuine concern. Fear that affirmative action misses the target is a common objection to its use. For example, while these measures may compensate women or black or minority ethnic individuals who've been unjustly deprived of valuable opportunities, they often fail to assist working class white men who've similarly suffered wrongful discrimination.

But laying out the syllogism of this argument helps us to identify a flaw in its reasoning. To see this, let's consider an alternative conclusion:

> *Alternative conclusion*: The state should use affirmative action more widely.

According to this alternative conclusion, rather than abandon the use of affirmative action because it doesn't reach all appropriate targets, the state should expand the use of these measures so that they do. What's significant here is that the alternative conclusion would look no less appropriate at the end of the syllogism than the originally asserted conclusion. This is important because it means that the original conclusion doesn't follow from the moral claim and the empirical claim. These two claims could be true, and yet the conclusion could be false. This is sometimes called a *non-sequitur*, and a non-sequitur can be a valuable means of challenging an argument.

A final virtue of placing arguments in syllogisms is that it allows us to crystalize an argument's moral claim. This is helpful because it brings into focus this component of a political argument, and it identifies where we should concentrate moral analysis.

4.2. Examples

As an entry point for discussing the tools of moral analysis, let's consider another argument that's sometimes used to oppose affirmative action:

> *Moral claim*: The state shouldn't treat an individual differently in virtue of her socially salient characteristics, such as her race or gender.
>
> *Empirical claim*: Affirmative action treats individuals differently in virtue of their socially salient characteristics.
>
> *Conclusion*: The state shouldn't adopt affirmative action.

This is the *reverse discrimination objection* to affirmative action. It's the worry that these measures are objectionable in the same way as other forms of wrongful discrimination, namely they treat an individual differently based on her socially salient characteristics. For example, affirmative action might reserve a set of seats in parliament for those who're female, not male; or for those who're black, not white.

But we can put pressure on the moral claim in this argument. We can do this by reflecting on the plausibility of the claim in various examples. We can consider a scenario in which the moral claim has implications about what the state should do, and then compare this to our own intuitive judgments.

For instance, let's consider the rules by which the state issues driving licences. One rule that it applies concerns sight. In particular, it refuses driving licences to those who're blind. When it does this, the state treats an individual differently in virtue of a socially significant characteristic. Accordingly, the moral claim of the reverse discrimination objection implies that this is wrongful.

But many won't share the judgment that it's wrong for the state to deny driving licenses to those who're blind. While it's true that this policy treats an individual differently in virtue of a socially salient characteristic, it doesn't seem wrong to do so in this case. This should lead us to doubt the plausibility of the moral claim and, in turn, this threatens to undermine the reverse discrimination objection.

4.3. Refining Moral Claims

Faced with the problematic example that we've described, the advocate of the reverse discrimination objection has a few options. One is to abandon the moral claim, taking it to have been falsified. Another possibility is to modify the claim. One way to do this is as follows:

> *Revised moral claim*: The state shouldn't treat an individual differently in virtue of her socially salient characteristics, such as her race or gender, when these characteristics aren't relevant to the case at hand.

This claim is stronger than the previous one. Again, we can show this by using examples. The practice of denying driving licenses to those who're blind isn't at odds with the revised moral claim. This is because sight bears on the capacity to drive, so the claim doesn't object to this rule. By contrast, let's imagine a case in which a less qualified male doctor is hired ahead of a more qualified female doctor, because the hiring committee prefers male to female doctors. Many regard this kind of hiring decision as wrongful, and the modified moral claim can explain this reaction. It involves treating an individual differently in virtue of a characteristic that's irrelevant to the case at hand.

We don't need to end our assessment of the moral claim here. We can test it by comparing its implication with our intuitive judgments in further examples, and we should accept, reject, or modify the claim accordingly. In this way, we can continue our analysis, perhaps reaching a point where we've a plausible moral claim, or where we've found that no modification can resolve its problems, and so we should reject it.

4.4. Underlying Moral Claims

Another way to extend our interrogation of a moral claim is to consider whether it's supported by any underlying reasoning that we should accept. We might ask: does this moral claim rely on a deeper judgment, a more overarching idea about how the state should act?

An advocate of the revised moral claim might contend that the state shouldn't treat an individual differently in virtue of her socially salient characteristics, such as her race or gender, when these characteristics aren't relevant to the case at hand *because this violates the demands of meritocracy*. On this view, the revised moral claim is supported by an underlying moral claim that applies to a much broader range of cases. We might state it as follows:

> *Underlying moral claim*: The state should award social positions to the best qualified candidate.

Again, identifying this claim in an argument can be useful for several reasons. It can help us to appreciate the moral ideas that underpin a line of reasoning, which we can then assess by exploring examples. In doing so, we can subject the argument to further testing. This can involve accepting, rejecting, or modifying the underlying moral claim as appropriate. In turn, this can give us grounds to endorse or discard the argument.

4.5. Kinds of Examples

It's by this process of testing and revising moral claims by using examples that we can assess their plausibility. Some of the examples that we discuss in this book are drawn from the world around us, like the case of driving licences. However, sometimes good examples

aren't so close to hand, as real-life scenarios can involve too much or too little detail to be helpful.[4]

Let's take the topic of humanitarian intervention. There are many historical examples that we can use to explore whether a state abusing the human rights of its subjects gives others a just cause to intervene. For instance, we might reflect on whether the United Kingdom was justified in invading Iraq in 2003. However, this example is problematic in several ways. Not least among these is that the United Kingdom has history of wrongful interference in the affairs of states in the Middle East. Because this may affect our judgment about whether the war in 2003 was justifiable, this may pollute our reasoning about whether human rights abuse provide a just cause for humanitarian intervention. In cases such as these, it can be helpful to use our imaginations a bit to purify an example. Perhaps we might consider whether it would've been justifiable to intervene under the assumption that the United Kingdom didn't have this history. Because operating in this way enables us to focus more precisely on the question at hand, this can be a useful exercise.

Occasionally, it can pay to be even more creative. Let's consider the following:

> *Green Button Experiment*: A state is violating the rights of its subjects. A foreigner owns a fabulous machine that, if activated by pressing a green button, would instantly discontinue all rights violations. The green button will have no effects, other than to block the rights violations.[5]

This example is entirely fictional. No such button really exists. But still, the example helpfully narrows our attention. By neutralizing other variables that bear on intervention, such as questions of likely effectiveness, it enables us to home in on the crux of the matter, where our intuitive judgments about what constitutes a just cause for humanitarian intervention are most informative.

The general point is that, by suspending various features of real life to tailor examples to our purposes, we can sharpen our moral analysis. This technique is known as using a thought experiment.

Specifying examples in a manner that's precisely tailored to assessing moral claims without being too far-fetched for us to pass any sensible judgment is a tricky art.[6] We must also be careful about the conclusions that we draw from thought experiments, particularly when they're very fanciful. For instance, if we assume away a history of wrongful interference, we can't use any subsequent insights to determine whether intervention is

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[4] Victor Tadros, *The Ends of Harm: The Moral Foundations of Criminal Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6-8.

[5] Fernando Tesón and Bas van der Vossen, *Debating Humanitarian Intervention: Should We Try to Save Strangers?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 45-49.

[6] For discussion, see Kimberley Brownlee and Zofia Stemplowska, 'Thought Experiments', in Blau (ed.), *Methods in Analytical Political Theory*, 21-45.

justifiable in cases where there's such a history. We need to build these factors back into our thinking somewhere along the way. None the less, it can remain valuable to use thought experiments to assess moral claims, and our outline in this section gives a broad overview of how and why they're employed in political philosophy.

5. From Arguments to Analysis and Back Again

So far in this chapter, we've identified which arguments warrant attention in political philosophy, highlighted the importance of arranging these arguments in a clear and precise manner, and introduced the tools with which to assess their moral claims. But there remains a question about what to do with these insights.

One central aim of political philosophy is to work up a view about which public policies the state should adopt. We can reason about moral values and their relationship to the exercise of political power in order to take a stance on what's the right course of action for the state to pursue. Sometimes, political arguments are *assertive*, seeking to defend a moral claim or public policy. Sometimes, they're *critical*, seeking to oppose or resist a view. In either case, it's important to be explicit about the conclusion of an argument, and also to elaborate which claims are necessary to get there and why these claims are plausible. Put in language that'll be familiar from a maths lessons: show your answer *and* your working.

Another important part of this task is to consider opposing views. The questions that political philosophy explores are typically matters of controversy that arise from disputes about the demands of morality. As G. A. Cohen warns, advocates of a view often fall into the trap of thinking that those on the other side of the debate are 'obviously wrong', sometimes because 'they are wholly unable to conceive how people who disagree with them could see things differently'.[7] But it's vital to appreciate the existence and merits of opposing views. As we describe in section 3, this involves discerning and properly exploring the arguments offered by political philosophers and others involved in politics, reading them charitably and looking for their strongest version. Accordingly, doing political philosophy requires not only that we defend our own view, but also that we explain and challenge opposing arguments. Furthermore, we must make it obvious when we're doing this – at each point in the text, we must be clear about whether we're relying on an idea to advance the view that we endorse or to challenge the alternatives.

It flows from these comments that another practical skill in political philosophy concerns how to present a view. The crucial thought is that 'organization = argument'.[8] Elaborating this point, Robert Goodin advises that one can 'use the structure of the paper to show the structure of the argument', ordinarily by putting analysis of different ideas into distinct sections.[9] An example of this is to organize a text by presenting our own position in the

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[7] G. A. Cohen, *On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice, and Other Essays in Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 231-232.
[8] Robert E. Goodin, 'How to Write in Analytical Political Theory', in Blau (ed.), *Methods in Analytical Political*, 18-20 at 18.
[9] Goodin, 'How to Write in Analytical Political Theory', 18.

earlier parts of a paper, and then identifying and challenging the alternatives in later sections. This kind of structure can make clear what claims and conclusions the text means to defend, as well as what opposing views it means to criticize.

Of course, there are many ways to present a political argument. These comments aren't to suggest that all political philosophy does or should follow the same template. They're intended as a guide to some important aspects of writing political philosophy, and to give some ideas about how to do this in practice. The chapters that follow present various models of this. As we noted in the introduction to this book, the rationale for offering an argument in each chapter, rather than merely summarizing the debate as a textbook might, is to provide practical examples of how to do political philosophy. In this respect, they can be read as a means of extending the guidance offered here.

6. Further Engagement in Political Philosophy

The purpose of this chapter is very much introductory. The aim was to provide a starter kit to familiarize readers with some of the most common features of the discipline. To this end, we've emphasized the importance of focusing on the moral ideas at the heart of political arguments, clarifying the claims of these views, and ordering them in a logical fashion. We've stressed the significance of adopting a clear position, engaging with the strongest contrasting views, and organizing a text to make a sustained argument. And, we've outlined how we can use syllogisms, examples, and thought experiments to analyse views and assess their moral claims.

There are two ways to take things further. One is to explore more detailed and more wide-ranging commentary on the vast array of tools and techniques that political philosophy uses. At the end of this chapter, we provide some suggestions of further reading that can guide this investigation. But perhaps more important than this is to begin engaging with political philosophy. As with many skills, much of the art is learned best by observing how it's practiced and by attempting to do it yourself. The rest of this book provides a resource for this. It's an exercise in political philosophy and, as it unfolds, it attempts to draw attention to the tools we've identified here. Perhaps it'll be useful to return to this introduction to review some of its content. But more than anything, we suggest that readers use it as a springboard for doing political philosophy, and we invite them to take up this task in other chapters.

Further Reading

A good place to begin reading about the aims and important features of political philosophical writing is the chapter on 'How to Do Political Philosophy' in G. A. Cohen, *On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice, and Other Essays in Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 225-235. Some further practical tips can be found in Robert Goodin, 'How to Write Analytical Political Theory', in Adrian Blau (ed.), *Methods in Analytical Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 18-20.

An <u>excellent and accessible introduction to the methods of political philosophy</u> is Jonathan Glover's 'The Scope and Limits of Moral Argument' in his *Causing Death and Saving Lives* (London: Penguin, 1977), 22-35.

A more <u>detailed discussion of the use and construction of example cases</u> is Kimberley Brownlee and Zofia Stemplowska, 'Thought Experiments', in Blau (ed.), *Methods in Analytical Political Theory*, 21-45.

For <u>more extensive discussions of methods in political philosophy</u>, there's Christian List and Laura Valentini, 'The Methodology of Political Theory', in Herman Cappelen, Tamar Azabó Gendler, and John Hawthorne (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Methodology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 525-553. Another place to look is in Blau (ed.), *Methods in Analytical Political Theory* and David Leopold and Marc Stears, *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).