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WHY IS THERE NO PHILOSOPHY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE?

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When looking at the field of philosophy of social science, it is striking that there are so many common questions across the disciplines that are concerned with explaining human behavior. Questions about the nature of explanation, the proper unit of analysis, reductionism, social ontology, methodological individualism—as well as other various questions about methodology—all seem to bubble up.

When we turn to the individual social sciences, however, something remarkable appears—or rather does *not* appear. While most disciplines have room for systematic reflection on the philosophical dimensions of their own particular field, not all of them exist. There is a well-established body of literature referred to as “philosophy of economics” which deals with fundamental concepts, methods, and problems that economic thought unearths. Similarly, there is a small but thriving field of philosophy of history (not to be confused with the large and thriving field of history of philosophy). There is philosophy of psychology, and even a budding philosophy of (Western and non-Western) sociology and anthropology. To a large extent these fields have their own journals, conferences, professional associations, and students. This is not the case, however, for one of the commonly recognized “big six” of the social sciences—economics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, and political science. And so we ask why, so far, has there been no field recognized as the “philosophy of political science?”

Now to say this does not mean that there has been no work in this area. Although this may sound like a contradiction, it is important to point out that a remarkably similar situation once existed in the philosophy of chemistry. Although there were a few scholars doing excellent work on relevant questions, there was no formally recognized discipline called the “philosophy of chemistry” until about 1997. Then everything changed. The field saw a sudden explosion of interest, resulting in two journals, an annual international conference, various research symposia, and several anthologies. And along with self-conscious recognition came a wealth of opportunities.¹

Does a similar situation now exist for the philosophy of political science? In asking this, it is important to do an assessment of the current standing of the field. For one thing, there is a Master's Degree program in the philosophy of political science offered at the University of

Leiden. How can it possibly be that there is a graduate program in a subject when there is no subject? The answer is that of course there is a subject, but perhaps it has just not gotten enough philosophical attention or recognition. Either the philosophy of political science already exists (but it just not called that), or it doesn't exist (because it shouldn't), or it should exist (but doesn't). Whichever of these possibilities explains the fact that there has so far been no formally recognized discipline that goes by this name—making it the longest-standing “missing tooth” in the philosophy of social science—the fact that work in this field has at least been neglected by most philosophers of science ~~is beyond dispute.~~

If one looks at the table of contents for the spate of recent handbooks, guides, and companions that have cropped up in the philosophy of social science over the last fifteen years (Turner and Roth 2003; Jarvie and Zamora-Bonilla 2011; Kincaid 2012) there is a discernible pattern. Although most feature ample coverage of issues in the philosophy of economics, history, and psychology, only one of them (Kincaid 2012) features an article with more than passing mention of political science. The situation is apparently no better at the biennial meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association (PSA), which showcases work throughout the philosophy of science (including both the philosophy of chemistry and the philosophy of social science). In a recent blog post Eric Schliesser asks “why the lack of philosophical interest in so many social sciences?”² He goes on to point out that at the 2014 PSA meeting in Chicago, there was ample representation of the philosophy of economics, but almost no coverage of any issues that could be said to fall within the philosophy of sociology, anthropology, or political science “despite the ‘naturalistic’ turn of the last four decades.” The same is true if one looks for research symposia, books, papers, and most anything else with “philosophy of political science” in its title.

So has the philosophy of political science—insofar as it exists—at least been neglected?

Perhaps the answer to this oversight has more to do with institutional forces than with scholarship. Political science arrived relatively late as an academic discipline. Before the mid-1800s there was a lot of scholarly work on politics done by historians and philosophers. In addition, there was more applied work done by the German *Polizeiwissenschaft* and the French *Écoles d'Administration*. Political science made its official debut in the American academic arena around 1860 and for a long time it was really an American discipline. From its very inception as political science practitioners placed far less emphasis on normative political theory than their intellectual predecessors. Instead, they sought to come up with a positive science of politics. Initially, they used historical methods.³ Later generations of political scientists abandoned for a large part the historical approach and tried to model the discipline after the natural sciences.⁴

This had a strong boost with the arrival of behaviorism and later with the adoption of new institutionalism after World War II. The political scientists of those days were anxious to distinguish themselves from political theorists. Political scientists sought to create a positive science and shed the fascination with normative speculation and ideal theory, which one of them—William Riker—characterized as “belles lettres, criticism, and philosophical speculation” as well as “phenomenology and hermeneutics” to distance his preferred branch of science from those approaches. Thus the self-image of those political scientists was that of a new science, unburdened with the “journalism” of earlier scholars, engaged in some hard-nosed inquiries about political behavior modeled after some ideal vista of (natural) science. (In this way, the methodological history of political science seems to have taken a page from economics, which underwent a similar change during ~~with~~ the “marginal revolution” of Jevons and Walras.) The discipline was simply too busy distancing itself from more philosophical approaches to engage in much philosophical reflection on its core concepts, methods, and theories. As an explanation

for the absence of such reflection this is not very convincing, however, since similar processes occurred in the establishment of the other branches of social science (notably psychology and economics) and this did not stop them from developing a systematic philosophical reflection on their disciplines. So the question remains: why is there no philosophy of political science?

Another possible explanation is that the label 'political science' as it is understood these days covers a plethora of approaches, theories, methods, objects of study, and intellectual traditions. It is natural to conclude that there is no single discipline of political science. If one looks at the various sub-disciplines that are traditionally included in political science this impression gets stronger. What do political theory, comparative politics, public administration, international relations, public law, and political economy have in common? This impression of a hodge-podge of disciplinary methodology is enhanced if one reflects on the approaches political scientists use: positivism, interpretivism, rational choice theory, behaviorism, structuralism, post-structuralism, realism, institutionalism, and pluralism. Perhaps the best we can say is that there is a (set of) topics and concerns that 'political scientists' share, typically referred to as 'politics'. In this regard, political science is not unlike, say, the study of marketing or area studies. That is, there is no political science as a unified discipline, what unites political scientists is a common topic of study. No wonder ~~that~~ there is no philosophy of political science.

However, this explanation will not do either. First, because it is unclear what the common topic is.⁵ Political scientists study wildly diverging topics ranging from parliamentary history to comparative political psychology, voting and elections, political movements, etc. The only thing these topics have in common is that they are in the domain of political science—and not even exclusively so, as people working in sociology, history, and anthropology concern themselves with these things as well. More importantly, the situation is not that different from the other special sciences. There too, an overabundance of ideas, approaches, theories, objects of study, and traditions shape the self-image of the field. And, once again, these sciences have their own 'philosophy of' so why would political science be so different?

Still another explanation for the absence of a philosophy of political science says that there are no *special* philosophical problems raised by the research of political scientists. That is, the philosophy of political science is just a run of the mill application of the philosophy of social science to the activities and concerns of political scientists. The philosophical problems political scientists face are no different from those, say, an economist or a psychologist might face. Could this be why there is no philosophy of political science? We note again a relevant similarity here to the debate over the founding of the philosophy of chemistry, when some initially said that the reason there was no such discipline was that all of the interesting questions in it were already taken up in the philosophy of physics. Had this been true, however, one would have expected the philosophy of physics to consider more questions that were of actual interest to chemists, rather than being almost exclusively concerned with relativity, quantum mechanics, and space-time. There did turn out to be some good philosophical questions in the philosophy of chemistry that were irreducible to the philosophy of physics, the first of which was whether chemistry itself was in fact completely reducible to physics. Similarly, one might now ask the question: if the philosophy of political science does not exist because it is reducible to some other discipline, what would that discipline be?

Some might argue that the successful introduction of formal economic methodology in political science shows that political science, understood as a positive science, basically is economics applied to the study of politics.⁶ Certainly, if one looks at the bulk of publications from the last decade of the previous century in the *American Political Science Review* (by many considered to

be *the* journal in political science) this argument has some merit. Most publications consisted either of detailed survey comparisons or of formal models of certain aspects of political processes (often without any empirical testing) inspired by the sort of work done by the best economic modelers. However, by the beginning of the 21st century, there was a lot of resistance to this kind of one-sided methodological approach and when in 2000 the so-called “Perestroika” movement emerged, it became clear that many, if not most, political scientists would not support this reduction of political science to economics, either substantially or formally.⁷

At this point, the question in our title may seem a bit odd, for if none of these aforementioned factors could explain, let alone justify, the absence of a philosophy of political science, one might feel moved to ask: “should it exist?” or “doesn’t it already?” After all, perhaps the work is just being done under the name of political theory by philosophers and political scientists alike. In what follows we will suggest that there are in fact some fundamental philosophical questions that are specific to the study of human political behavior. What is more, practitioners of political science are often aware of these results. In other words, we will suggest that there is (and should be) a philosophy of political science. However, unlike the other disciplines in the social sciences, there has as yet been no separate field of study commonly referred to as the “philosophy of political science.”

A lot of philosophical analysis of political behavior is being done under the heading of political theory, yet political theorists do not have a monopoly on all philosophically interesting aspects of political science. For one thing, we would take it as a virtue that if a field called “the philosophy of political science” comes forward, it would be recognized—like its brethren “the philosophy of economics” and “the philosophy of psychology”—as a branch of the philosophy of social science, which is itself a branch of the philosophy of science. Here it seems important to draw a potential distinction between the “philosophy of political science” and “political theory.” Obviously, the latter field has existed for thousands of years, and traces its roots back to Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Machiavelli, and Condorcet, roots that are intertwined with the roots of philosophy itself. This does not mean, however, that the only philosophical interest here concerns theory, for, as we have seen, political science at its incipience put itself forward as an *empirical* discipline. This should put at least some questions in the philosophical study of political science squarely in the wheelhouse of the philosophy of social science (and so the philosophy of science), where we may be rightly concerned with explanation, laws, reductionism, and other methodological issues in the scientific study of human behavior. Indeed, if the distinction between theory and behavior does not exist in the social sciences, then why hasn’t there been more debate over whether economics deserved its own “philosophy of” designation and could have been better handled as “economic theory?” Why did political science, along with economics, psychology, and certain branches of sociology, long ago come forward as a quantitative discipline with a laser-like focus on the scientific explanation of human behavior? Because they recognized that in the actual world, we do not always behave as rationally or consistently as we do in theory. And, even if the earliest economic models had difficulties with its own simplifying assumptions about “perfect information” and “perfect rationality,” the philosophy of economics was nonetheless born of an interest in seeing how, in comparison with actual behavior, we might make our explanations better. In fact, one wonders whether all of the previous philosophical criticism over the inadequate methodology of neoclassical economics is what has led, in recent years, to the much more rigorous (experimental) research program of behavioral economics. Might a similar methodological revolution be on the horizon if we turned the attention of more philosophers of science toward political science?

In what follows, we will give three more or less interdependent examples of current work done by political scientists that is distinctively philosophical in nature and of particular interest to the concerns of empirical political scientists. Of course these three examples do not exhaust the philosophical questions within political science, nor are they completely representative of such questions, but they do support our assertion that a more self-conscious focus on the issues that may arise from the “philosophy of political science” might yield many benefits.⁸

Voting

Perhaps the most distinctive act of political activity in all contemporary states is the act of voting. Political scientists have studied voting behavior systematically since the 1940s, focusing on the determinants of voting behavior, the interplay between institutional rules, and strategies of political candidates. Often they have attempted to predict election results, thus living up to the self-image of political science as a positive discipline.

However, the practice of voting raises all kinds of fundamental philosophical questions about the activity and its coherence. First, there are fundamental questions as to why people vote in the first place. As Downs (1957) and others have remarked, in many circumstances it makes no sense to vote.⁹ An example can bring home the point. Suppose all that matters to a typical voter is that her preferred candidate, A, wins the district seat in a winner-take-all, single-vote system. Suppose furthermore that there are ninety-nine voters in this district and that there are only two candidates, A and B. Then either her vote is the deciding vote that gets candidate A the win or it is not. This is the case only if the vote is completely tied. That is, if A has exactly forty-nine supporters and B has the remaining forty-nine votes. Even if we assume that for each typical voter in this group the probability that they support A equals 0.5, then the probability that her vote will be the deciding one is 0.01. For any other distribution that probability rapidly approaches 0. Since most actual elections have more than two candidates, and the probability with which candidates are supported varies, the chance that one’s vote is decisive is negligible. Given that voting requires some effort and that other things besides the outcome of the election will matter to voters, it is unlikely that voting is actually worth the effort—it is irrational. Yet, paradoxically, people vote.¹⁰

This initial conclusion has raised a lot of discussion about the motivation of voters. Downs’s theory is an example of the so-called public choice school in political science, which takes its inspiration from economic theory.¹¹ Public choice theory models political agents as self-interested preference maximizers whose behavior is rational relative to those preferences. In doing so, it proposes a very particular and somewhat restricted view of voting behavior. It leaves out expressive or intrinsic reasons for voting that motivate voters to express their political preferences. If those are taken into account, voting once again seems to make sense.¹² However, it does so at a cost, for it abandons the elegant—if somewhat unrealistic—picture of political man as a rational preference maximizer and imbues her with drives and motives that seem puzzling from the point of view of the public choice approach.¹³ More generally, discussions such as these have flagged a fundamental concern about the plausibility of the implicit picture of the citizen in empirically oriented political theory.¹⁴

It is not just the motivation of individual voters that seems paradoxical; it has long been observed that common democratic voting procedures are problematic as well. Nicolas de Condorcet (1743–94) already proved that simple majority rule could result in incoherent overall

social preferences.¹⁵ For example, suppose one third of the electorate prefers candidate A to B to C; another third B to C to A, and a final third C to A to B. Then the majority of this electorate prefers A to B; B to C and C to A. Thus, even if individual political preferences are perfectly coherent and rational, the overall ranking of alternatives need not be. Two hundred years later, Nobel Prize winner Kenneth Arrow generalized this observation and proved that any voting procedure that meets some very weak and plausible requirements can generate such results. His proof is one of the central results of social choice theory—the formal theory of collective decision processes and procedures.¹⁶

A quick discussion of Arrow's impossibility result may be helpful to illustrate this. Let $N = \{1, 2, \dots, n\}$ (with $n > 2$) be the set of voters and $X = \{x, y, z, \dots\}$ be the set of alternatives submitted to the vote (these can be candidates, policies, proposals, etc.). Suppose that each individual i has a preference ordering R_i over these alternatives. Let the function F be a voting rule that gives an overall ordering of the alternatives R . Then these are the requirements that Arrow proposed:

- *Universal domain*: F takes as its domain the set of all logically possible profiles of complete and transitive individual preference orderings. In other words, a plausible voting rule works for all possible electoral preference rankings of alternatives.
- *Ordering*: For any profile of individual rankings $\langle R_1, R_2, \dots, R_n \rangle$ in the domain of F , the overall ordering R is complete and transitive. So the overall ordering that F gives, will include all the alternatives and is non-cyclical.
- *Weak Pareto principle*: For any profile $\langle R_1, R_2, \dots, R_n \rangle$ in the domain of F , if all individuals rank x over y , then F ranks x over y . This is a weak unanimity requirement.
- *Independence of irrelevant alternatives*: For any two profiles $\langle R_1, R_2, \dots, R_n \rangle$ and $\langle R^*_1, R^*_2, \dots, R^*_n \rangle$ in the domain of F and any $x, y \in X$, if for all $i \in N$ R_i 's ranking between x and y coincides with R^*_i 's ranking between x and y , then xRy if and only if xR^*y . This just means that the overall order between x and y will not change if other alternatives are added to X .
- *Non-dictatorship*: There does not exist an individual $i \in N$ such that, for all $\langle R_1, R_2, \dots, R_n \rangle$ in the domain of F and all $x, y \in X$, xP_iy implies xPy .

Notice that these requirements are indeed plausible and seemingly innocent. We already saw that simple majority rule does not satisfy these requirements. Condorcet's theorem illustrates this: in the example above there was no clear 'winner'. Arrow proved that there is no voting rule F that satisfies these conditions.

There is enormous variety in voting procedures: majoritarian rules, rank-dependent systems (e.g. Borda rule), winner-take-all, etc. Arrow's formalization gives the theorist the tools to characterize any possible voting procedure. However, the importance of Arrow's work is not just theoretical. It gave focus to a lot of research in real-world electoral systems and their problems. For example, it is well confirmed that voting procedures tend to co-vary with electoral constellations and political outcomes. For example, a much-discussed observation is 'Duverger's law', which says that plurality rule voting in a single member district system favors two-party systems as is the case in the USA and the UK.¹⁷ Social choice theory gave researchers tools to put Duverger's law to the test and improve upon it.¹⁸

Arrow's impossibility theorem has been regarded as a challenge for political scientists who are interested in voting procedures. William Riker argued that the theorem shows that populist democracy is incoherent.¹⁹ He also argued that there is at least one historical example of a

radical failure of the sort that Arrow's theorem predicts: the voting in the United States House of Representatives that led to the start of the American Civil War resulted in a non-transitive outcome. Others have taken issue with his claim that democracy is incoherent.²⁰ Still others have taken issue with the requirements of Arrow. For example, Duncan Black has shown that if one restricts the universal domain condition in such a way that only well-behaved 'single-peaked' rankings are in the domain of F , then the overall ordering will be complete and transitive.²¹ Others have taken issue with the Pareto requirement since it can imply that individual rights will be violated, rendering it less attractive as a requirement.²²

Similarly, the requirement of the independence of irrelevant alternatives has attracted some scrutiny.²³ It turns out that rules that violate this requirement are vulnerable to strategic voting. Strategic voting is voting behavior where voters do not vote according to their real preference, but instead vote in such a manner that the overall result will be more to their preference. A well-known example concerns the voting by supporters of Ralph Nader in the 2000 presidential election who voted for Al Gore rather than Nader so as to prevent George Bush from winning—their least preferred alternative. Alan Gibbard and William Satterthwaite have shown that voting rules that result in unique winners that satisfy universal domain and non-dictatorship conditions (and have at least three alternatives) can be manipulated in that way.²⁴ This then again raises questions about the motivation of voters to vote in a particular way: to what extent can one be sure that these reflect actual political preferences? Since many actually used voting procedures (such as the Borda rule or the plurality rule) violate this requirement, one also wonders to what extent the resulting collective outcome reflects the political preferences of voters.

The important thing to realize is that these results are the outcome of meticulous theoretical thought about voting as well as empirical research. They provoke intense debate about the nature of voting, the role of institutional rules about voting, as well as questions of institutional design. Here then is one example of a range of philosophical questions that have been considered primarily—but of course not exclusively—within circles of political scientists, that are ripe for more philosophical work.

Democracy

Voting is the quintessential political act that most adults in modern liberal democracies will ever perform. It is no coincidence then that many political scientists interested in voting are concerned with democracy as well. Democracy, in its most general and abstract meaning, refers to those methods of collective decision making that are characterized by a kind of equality among the participants. This requirement of equality can be conceived in purely formal terms in that every vote counts equally towards the result, as is the case in many representational systems. It can be more substantial in that all voters have an equal say in substantive matters, as is the case in participatory democracies, or it can be interpreted as a constraint on the legitimacy of outcomes according to which a political decision is legitimate or authoritative only if the interests of all those concerned were considered, or indeed, anything in between. The diversity of democratic regimes and institutions requires a theory of democracy that does justice to the variety of democracies and their accompanying systems of participation and representation, but also explains what all democratic systems have in common.

If one thinks of voting as a form of expressing one's political preferences and judgments—that a voting procedure is supposed to transform into a more or less coherent collective judgment, as

is the case in public choice and social choice theory—then it seems obvious to think of democracy as a kind of preference aggregation procedure where the political preferences of the citizens are more or less given and the political result, e.g. the winner of elections, is to be evaluated against these. Politics, in this conception of democracy, is the institution that aims to satisfy the (political) preferences of citizens, much like markets aim to satisfy the economic preferences of consumers. Democracies then are those political aggregation systems where everyone's preference has an equal weight resulting in a fair compromise between these preferences, much as equal purchasing power of consumers on the market would lead to fair market outcomes. In this light, the concern of social choice theorists for incoherent and manipulable overall collective judgments becomes quite relevant. If it can be shown that under real-world conditions specific democratic institutions thwart the 'fair' outcomes, then so much the worse for those institutions. Manipulation of democratic processes, similarly, will be a major worry as these too can thwart such 'fair' outcomes.

However, democracy's potential virtues as a fair form of institutional preference aggregation have not played a dominant role in any alternative school of thinking. In the same writings in which the marquis de Condorcet argues that simple majority rule could render aggregative results incoherent, he recommends trial by jury using a simple probability calculus. Suppose that a jury has to decide whether or not a defendant is guilty. Suppose that for each juror individually the probability that he or she gives the right verdict upon examining the evidence equals p and $p > 0.5$. Then the probability that the majority of the jury will reach the correct decision approaches 1 as the number of jurors on the jury increases.²⁵ Extrapolating this rather simple argument to actual juries and actual electorates (as well as actual organizations), these authors argue that democratically organized collectives are more likely to 'get it right'. That is, the reason why democracy is preferable to other forms of governance is epistemic, rather than that the resulting decision will be a fair compromise of the preferences of all citizens.²⁶

Others, however, reject both these ways of thinking about democracy and indeed of politics. They emphasize that politics is not just a more or less passive process of preference aggregation where political institutions, like markets, simply function to 'translate' these preferences into a more or less coherent result. Neither is politics an institutional way of consulting the wisdom of crowds. Crucial to politics is the formation of those preferences and beliefs. Political debate is not just a collective bargaining process, where agents try to maximize their political preferences or consult others' beliefs, rather it is the very place where those preferences and beliefs are formed. That is, these authors contrast democracy conceived as a market of preferences or beliefs with democracy conceived of as a 'forum'—a place of debate and deliberation.²⁷ For these theorists, voting is but one form of democratic participation and not the most interesting one for that matter. Furthermore, democratic deliberation that shapes political preferences is massively important for the acceptance and legitimacy of the decisions thus reached.²⁸ This emphasis on the formative and legitimizing aspects of democratic institutions has spawned a lot of research into the efficacy of alternative deliberative institutions. Citizen juries, deliberative panels, and many alternative forms of consultation and deliberation have been proposed and investigated.²⁹

Here, therefore, we have another example of philosophical reflection on political scientific research into the nature of democracy. A lot of this work is done under the heading of 'political theory' but it is crucial to see and understand that it is born from the cross-fertilization of philosophical and empirical work in political science.

Freedom

Historically, the interest in democracies comes from a view on political freedom. Democracies, it is thought, are free societies. This imprecise claim raises conceptual, methodological, as well as empirical questions.

Consider the conceptual issue of freedom. What is it? In 1819 Benjamin Constant wrote his famous essay comparing the freedom of the 'ancients' with that of the 'moderns'.³⁰ 'Ancient' freedom is republican, participatory freedom. On this view, a state is free if it is free from outside influences and interference and enjoys self-rule. Citizens have a burdensome moral obligation to participate in the governing of the state. This notion of freedom, then, is primarily concerned with the question 'who rules'. 'Modern' freedom on the other hand is the freedom one enjoys in the absence of the state. A state is free if its citizens have civil liberties and the state is absent in some private areas of life. Isaiah Berlin, in his famous inaugural lecture, echoed this distinction and traced the historical roots of either notion.³¹ He distinguished 'negative' from 'positive' freedom. A person is free in the negative sense, if she is free from external limits on her options. (This is similar to Constant's 'modern' sense of freedom.) This view of freedom can be traced back to Hobbes.³² Negative freedom then is only impaired by the presence of something. A person is free in the 'positive' sense, if she is master of her own life; when it is 'up to her' what she will do. Notice that one can be free in this positive sense, even if there are very few options available to the agent. Berlin, like Constant before him, criticized the ancient tradition and endorsed the liberal, 'negative' version of freedom.

Contemporary authors, however, have a very different understanding of positive freedom. Rather than the freedom to self-rule, they think of positive freedom as the presence of the means to utilize one's negative freedom. For example, if there is no access to the Internet in a society because of legal prohibitions, that society lacks important negative freedoms. Suppose that these prohibitions are lifted and access to the Internet becomes available in this society, but that it is prohibitively expensive to use. In that case, there is more negative freedom than before in this society, but the positive freedom to utilize this option is lacking. In other words, supporters of negative freedom claim that one can only be robbed of one's freedom by the presence of some obstacle; supporters of positive freedom on the other hand hold that one can also be robbed of one's freedom by the absence of something (e.g. sufficient income).

Gerald MacCallum has pointed out that if this is how one understands positive and negative freedom, then it is relatively straightforward to combine the two notions in one triadic formula: x is free from y to z , where x ranges over individuals, y over obstacles, and z over actions.³³ The disagreement between supporters of negative freedom and those of positive freedom then is not a disagreement as to what the 'real' or 'true' conception of freedom is. Rather, it is a disagreement about the extension of y and z . This unified conception of freedom is important for the theory of the measurement of freedom.

Before we get to the methodological issues at stake in that debate, we need to consider one important contemporary third way of understanding freedom. This is the neo-republican theory of freedom, which in many ways goes back to the old republican tradition that was rejected by Constant. Neo-republicans hold that to be free means that one is free from arbitrary and non-controllable power.³⁴ This third way shares with the 'ancient' understanding of freedom that external influences are seen as something undesirable. It shares with the unified triadic formulation of freedom that one can be unfree when one is subjected to external obstacles or internal compulsions (for then one is not free to do z), but only when these are the result of arbitrary

and uncontrollable factors. What is more, these factors need not even be active to result in a loss of freedom. For example, imagine a benevolent dictator who rules with absolute authority over his subjects. He does so with their wishes and wellbeing in mind. He imposes minimal constraints on their daily activities and indeed on their political activities. His subjects are free from coercion and interference by him and they are free to do (most of) the things they want to do. However, should this dictator decide to take away these freedoms and impose fierce constraints simply because he feels like it, his subjects are completely at his mercy. It is not unlikely that the subjects of our dictator will adapt their behavior so as not to displease him and avoid attracting his ire and ill feeling. Neo-republicans argue that this constitutes a loss of freedom. Note that the loss is not the result of (actual) coercion and state interference. Nor is it the result of somebody other than the subjects determining here and now what they are going to do (i.e., they are free in the positive sense as Berlin distinguished it), yet these people lack robust control of their own lives. For this reason neo-republicans favor strong constitutions that bind authorities as well as certain forms of social support that enable people to be independent and have control over their own lives.³⁵

Having distinguished these three ways of thinking about freedom, one might wonder how one determines whether one is free. Similarly, one could compare regimes in terms of how much freedom they allow their citizens. That is, with the conceptual work out of the way for now, one could start to wonder about the measurement of freedom. It is here that the techniques of social choice theory once again become relevant.

Some have argued that the idea of measuring freedom is nonsensical. One reason for this can be found in what the value of freedom is in the first place. For example, Ronald Dworkin has argued that freedom as such does not have any value—only specific freedoms are valuable.³⁶ The freedom to buy fifty kinds of soda is irrelevant, whereas freedom of speech is relevant. Therefore, the idea that one can attach a value to ‘freedom as such’ is nonsensical, as are comparisons of freedom. However, it is an open debate whether freedom only has such specific value. Ian Carter has argued that freedom has non-specific value.³⁷ That is, one’s freedom has increased with the addition of feasible options. If before one could only get one kind of soda and now fifty kinds of soda, that is an enlargement of one’s soda-buying liberty from no liberty to a lot of liberty even though there is nothing specifically valuable in the freedom to buy a particular brand of, say, root beer.

Using very weak and plausible assumptions, Pattanaik and Xu have constructed a metric of freedom that reflects this non-specific value of freedom. It entails that as one’s feasible options increase, one is more free—a result they deem to be ‘naïve and trivial’ in that it throws out all kinds of other information one may have about the options.³⁸ Taking their lead, others have tried to construct measurements of freedom that avoid naïveté and triviality. However, in doing so, several difficult problems arise, most notably the problem of how to individuate the feasible options open to the agent. If freedom consists, *inter alia*, in the lack of constraints an agent faces, removal of constraints enlarges one’s freedom. So suppose that one makes driving an automobile much cheaper. Then one has removed a constraint on driving. How many constraints has one removed? Just one, or has one removed a constraint on driving to this or that specific destination? What should we count? Moreover, how should the individual options be weighed? Does the freedom to kill other human beings count for as much as the freedom to borrow books from the library? Another problem concerns the comparability of the different ways of constraining freedom. Does the unfreedom created by coercion and state interference count for as much as the unfreedom created by natural events?

Traditionally, these questions were objects of abstract theorizing by political theorists and political philosophers. More and more, however, they are raised by actual empirical work, for example, in the methodology of the various rankings that organizations like Freedom House and others publish.³⁹ These questions are not just of concern to political philosophers and theorists but have important ramifications for comparative empirical work. It should be clear that this work is relevant for how we think of freedom, of its value, of its place in democracies, or indeed, of the freedom to vote. In other words, here too we find an example of philosophical reflection on research done by political scientists that merits the label ‘philosophy of political science’.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have tried to illustrate that, contrary to the question in our title, there already is a philosophy of political science. Much of it is done by political scientists as well as political theorists, but not exclusively so. This means that the situation of political science, in spite of the details of its emergence on the academic scene or the somewhat chaotic cornucopia of methodology and topics, is not much different from the situation of the other special disciplines. So does it matter much what we call it or insist that it be recognized as a branch of the philosophy of social science? If political theory and the philosophy of political science are largely extensionally equivalent, how much advantage is there in trying to create the philosophy of political science? Or at least to bring it in out of the shadows and call it what it is?

If the only role that philosophers had in this debate were to say “we should pay more attention to what they’re doing in political science” the effect would be minimal. For—as we have shown—there are those who are already paying attention. Likewise if the conclusion of most philosophers turned out to be “there are no current issues in political science that are worthy of much philosophical attention; let the political theorists have it,” we would be loath to impose interest where there was none. But neither seems to be the case. Rather the content of a legitimately recognized philosophical study of the *science* of human political behavior seems to already be there, as it has been for some time—and has merely not bothered to do the work to claim a new title.

Why should it? We think that the payoff could be great. By embracing the idea that the philosophy of political science is part of the philosophy of social science, it will open new doors, as those who are schooled in the particular interests and expertise of philosophers or science will bring fresh insight to the methodological and explanatory questions that concern political science. The establishment of political science a century and a half ago sought its break from the study of politics and its pre-scientific history, and took up questions that could only be answered by an empirical approach. Doesn’t philosophical concern with this discipline therefore deserve its own break from political theory?

Is this to presume that all of political science is (or should be) quantitative? That the war with qualitative methods has been won? Some would argue that the reason the philosophy of economics and the philosophy of psychology have been able to come forward so robustly is that their underlying fields are more scientific, so their ‘philosophy of’ designation is less problematic. Sociology, anthropology, and history, however, are less empirical, so their standing as branches of the philosophy of social science is more suspect. But note that even the latter have their own ‘philosophy of’ designations. Of course, this does not presume an answer to the debate over the usefulness or status of positivism, interpretivism, or any of the other methodological approaches

in political science, any more than in anthropology or sociology. There are quantitative and qualitative methods in all of the social sciences. But the focus of all of them is nonetheless explanatory and so, finally, empirical. As such, especially given the speed of its recent turn toward quantitative methods, as well as the fierce organized resistance to it, political science seems long overdue for its own ‘philosophy of’ designation.

The philosophical study of economics and psychology has thrived under this arrangement. So has the philosophy of chemistry. We believe that the philosophical questions raised by political science will receive more and better-focused attention—and more scholarship devoted to the specific questions raised by its methodology—as a result of this self-conscious shift in focus. Philosophers of science are well attuned to the explanatory and methodological issues in scientific fields. We bring something that historians of political thought—or what has been called “political philosophy”—have not self-consciously wrought, which is the acceptance and consideration of political science as an empirical examination, *inter alia*, of our ideas about democracy and freedom as revealed in our voting behavior.

There are, of course, institutional benefits too: Conferences, symposia, anthologies, and with them more scholarship. Just as in the philosophy of chemistry, one expects that the good work done so far will be followed by an avalanche of good work to come. Thus do we feel that the philosophy of political science should take its rightful place alongside the philosophy of economics, the philosophy of history, and the philosophies of psychology, sociology, and anthropology as a branch of the philosophy of social science, devoted to the explanatory questions that arise in the empirical study of human political behavior.

So what’s in a name? In itself nothing. Unless you use it to signal others who might have missed it that you’re here and worthy of renewed attention. Then it can be extraordinary.

Notes

- 1 For more on the history of this transformation see Scerri and McIntyre 1997. For an excellent compendium of work in the philosophy of chemistry before it was called that, see Scerri 1997.
- 2 Schliesser 2014.
- 3 Thus, for example, the motto of the seminar room of the Political Science Department at Johns Hopkins University, one of the early powerhouses of the newly established political science, was “History is past politics and politics present history.”
- 4 On this most authoritative histories of the discipline concur. For a good overview, see Farr 1988.
- 5 The question as to what constitutes ‘politics’ is itself a question of ongoing concern and disagreement, as can be seen if one compares, for example, Lasswell 1936; Arendt 1958; Easton 1965; Crick 2000; Leftwich 2004.
- 6 This is one way in which the so-called ‘economic imperialism’ is manifested (Mäki 2009).
- 7 Monroe 2015.
- 8 It is important to point out here, however, that all of our examples focus more or less on the increasing use of formal methods (especially social choice theory) in political science, as well as some of the reactions to this trend. We do not mean to take sides in the debate about the merits of these methods. They are certainly not the “only game in town.” However, they are illustrative of our claim that there is a case for the existence of a philosophy of political science.
- 9 But see Riker and Ordeshook 1968 for a contrary result.
- 10 What is more, if this line of reasoning is correct, it is also paradoxical that voters take the effort to inform themselves about political issues and what each candidate stands for. In this connection the rise of voting advice applications is remarkable, e.g. Fossen and Anderson 2014.
- 11 A nice overview of the theory and its main results is Mueller 1997.
- 12 Brennan and Lomasky 1993.

- 13 Some authors have concluded that voters are irrational and that, therefore, politics is intrinsically irrational, e.g. Caplan 2007, 2008. Again, the potential for experimental work on this assumption, by analogy with behavioral economics, seems ripe.
- 14 See for example Elster 1983, 1989. Of course, there are concerns about the adoption of such ideal types in social science that are relevant for all social sciences alike.
- 15 Condorcet 1785.
- 16 Arrow 1950.
- 17 Duverger 1959.
- 18 See Riker 1982b for an overview.
- 19 Riker 1982a.
- 20 For example, Mackie 2003.
- 21 Black 1948. A ranking profile is 'single peaked' if one can order the alternatives x, y, z , from 'left to right', such that each individual's ranking will have a most preferred alternative on that line with decreasing preference as alternatives get more distant (in either direction) from the most preferred position. In the example of Condorcet, the preferences of the electorate are not single peaked.
- 22 For example, Sen 1970.
- 23 One can't here resist sharing an old joke about the irrationality of considering irrelevant alternatives. A philosopher walks into a diner to order a piece of pie. The waiter says "We have cherry and apple." The philosopher orders a slice of apple pie. The waiter then says "Oh wait, we also have pumpkin," to which the philosopher replies "In that case I'll take the cherry."
- 24 Gibbard 1973; Satterthwaite 1975. It is, of course, unclear to what extent that is a bad thing: Dowding and Hees 2008.
- 25 Here is an arithmetical example. Suppose a typical juror has a probability of $p = 0.6$ to arrive at the right answer. A jury consisting of one juror then will return the correct verdict with $P = 0.6$. Suppose we expand the jury to three members, then the probability that the majority of the jury will reach a correct verdict then equals $P = 0.6^3 + 3(0.6 \cdot 0.6 \cdot 0.4) = 0.648$. It is crucial, however, that for this to work the jurors must not be influenced by one another before they have made their decision. For more on the intricacies of the Condorcet Jury Theorem see Sunstein 2008.
- 26 For example, Estlund 2008.
- 27 Elster 1997.
- 28 Rawls 1971; Habermas 1976; Rawls 1993; Habermas 1998.
- 29 The work of John Dryzek is a good example of this trend to test philosophically inspired claims about deliberative institutions empirically: J. Dryzek 1999, 1999; J. S. Dryzek 2006, 2010.
- 30 Repr. in Constant 1988.
- 31 Berlin 1969.
- 32 Hobbes 1991, ch. 21.
- 33 MacCallum 1967.
- 34 Pettit 1997, 2012.
- 35 See also Pettit 2014.
- 36 Dworkin 1978, 268–74.
- 37 Carter 1999.
- 38 Pattanaik and Xu 1990.
- 39 For example, the kinds of comparisons that are made in "Freedom House" 2015; "Country Rankings: World and Global Economy Rankings on Economic Freedom" 2015; "How Free Is Your State?" 2015.

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