

# Experimental Political Philosophy: A Manifesto

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Ye shall know them by their fruits.

Matthew 7:16

Superfluous branches

We lop away, that bearing boughs may live.

Shakespeare *Richard II* Act III, Scene 4

The adoption of formal and empirical tools has become commonplace in mainstream philosophy. The analytic revolution at the beginning of the last century was born largely out of advances in formal logic, which exposed and clarified a new set of philosophical problems. As philosophical questions increasingly overlapped with questions in cognitive science and linguistics, tools from those disciplines also became more common in philosophy. Many of the early innovators in decision theory and game theory were also philosophers (e.g., John Harsanyi, Richard Jeffrey, David Lewis) and those tools were quickly seen as important in philosophical investigation. Perhaps surprisingly, though, the empirical methods of the social and natural sciences, especially their most powerful method—randomized experiments—were slow to be adopted, only becoming widespread in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is too soon to say that experimental philosophy has transitioned from a topic to a commonly accepted tool, but it is certainly more common deployed and accepted as legitimate than it was 20 years ago.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, many of the top philosophy journals do not publish papers with experimental results. *Philosophical Review* is the most notable here and has not, as far as I can tell, ever published an experimental paper. Perhaps the top journal in ethics and

The use of formal methods from economics and political science (e.g., game theory and social choice theory) in political philosophy is now common, as are the core concepts of modern economic theory. Political philosophers, however, have been slow to embrace the core empirical methods of these disciplines, specifically experiments. Experimental philosophers have tended to ignore core questions in political philosophy as well. In the rest of this essay, I will argue that there are good reasons for political philosophers to use experiments and to integrate experimental and empirical methods into their core training. My argument rests on two controversial claims that I aim to defend. First, that political philosophy is and ought to be a concerned with real political and social issues and, hence, will be thoroughly embedded with empirical claims. This means that political philosophers can neither be ignorant of the empirical methods and tools used to adjudicate these claims, nor can they merely outsource their use to specialists. Second, because of this, political philosophers should embrace an integrative, PPE (Philosophy, Politics, and Economics) based approach to political philosophy generally and to the use of empirical methods specifically.

## **1. Empirical Political Philosophy**

Experimental philosophy arose when philosophers started adopting tools and techniques from social psychology and cognitive science for use in their philosophical work. Initially, questions in epistemology and the philosophy of mind were at the center of the experimental philosophy. It was not long until moral theory and ethics also received the experimental treatment. In one sense, the application of experimental methods to ethics was merely a continuation of a case-based method already common in the literature. The most obvious example here is the ubiquitous “trolley problem,” initially developed by

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social philosophy, *Ethics*, also explicitly states that it will not publish papers with novel experimental results. From their Instructions for Authors (on the website, but not in the print edition), “*Ethics* does not publish empirical studies or new statistical findings as such, but analytical essays that draw on such work and provide significant theoretical reflection are welcome.” Despite this, *Ethics* did recently publish a paper that looked at data on gender representation in philosophy journals (Hassoun et al. 2022). It is not clear whether this represents a change in policy or whether the editors think the paper doesn’t constitute “empirical study” or “new statistical findings.”

Phillipa Foot (1967) and extended by Judith Jarvis Thomson (1976; 1985) and Frances Kamm (2006). Philosophers used this case and its variations as a “thought-experiment” to isolate elements of the case and test whether those or some other features were decisive in generating moral judgements. It was only natural that philosophically inclined cognitive scientists and moral psychologists such as Josh Greene (2004; 2008), Jonathan Haidt (2001; 2002), Fiery Cushman (2008; 2009), Josh Knobe (2009; 2008), Shaun Nichols (2002b; 2002a; 2004), and many others would find rich soil to work at the intersection of cognitive science and moral theory.

Experimental philosophy now has a foothold in most areas of philosophy, but there is still some dispute as to what the experimental program in philosophy amounts to. In the most general sense, experimental philosophy is just the use of experimental methods as a tool to answer philosophical questions. This raises the question, though, of what the “experimental method” is. After all, Hume (1739) claimed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century that his *Treatise* was “an attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects.” He extends this point in the first *Enquiry*:

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: For it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion (Hume 1748, sec. 12.34, SBN 165).

By “experimental reasoning,” Hume seems to have meant something like empirical hypothesis testing in the context of philosophical problems. Philosophical questions, at root, make claims that either bear on or draw on matters of facts and existence or questions of relation and structure. On this view, there is no distinctive philosophical method or domain of inquiry. Rather, philosophy is characterized by the abstraction and generality of the questions it asks, as well as by the rigorous standards of justification that it employs. In philosophy, all claims must meet the bar of public, rational justification. As Wilfrid Sellars famously put this point:

The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term. Under 'things in the broadest possible sense' I include such radically different items as not only 'cabbages and kings', but numbers and duties, possibilities and finger snaps, aesthetic experience and death. To achieve success in philosophy would be, to use a contemporary turn of phrase, to “know one's way around” with respect to all these things, not in that unreflective way in which the centipede of the story knew its way around before it faced the question, “how do I walk?”, but in that reflective way which means that no intellectual holds are barred (Sellars 1963, 1).

In philosophy, “no intellectual holds are barred” in the sense that philosophy does not restrict the types of questions or calls for justification that can be levied against any claim.

Political philosophy, understood in this way, is the inquiry into fundamental normative and explanatory questions related to political and social life. This can include investigations into political concepts like “justice” or “freedom” as well as questions about the nature of a good or just society. Plato’s *Republic* is, at least on its most obvious reading, is a prolonged investigation into the nature of justice and how a just society related to justice as an individual virtue. Isaiah Berlin’s “Two Concepts of Liberty” and the literature it spawned are examples of a political conceptual investigation into freedom.<sup>2</sup> Few political philosophical questions are purely conceptual, though, and those that are concerned with concepts that are deeply embedded in practical, empirical contexts. It wouldn’t be possible, and no serious political philosopher has tried, to think about what justice or freedom amounts to without thinking carefully about real political institutions and facts about social life.

It should be no surprise that all major political philosophers pursued their philosophical questions while taking empirical enquiry very seriously. This is most obvious in the early modern social contract theorists, but also stands out in the classical utilitarians

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<sup>2</sup> For a good overview of political concepts, see (Gaus 2000).

and in the work of contemporary theorists, such as John Rawls, David Gauthier, Brian Barry, Robert Goodin, Philip Pettit, Gerald Gaus, Amartya Sen, David Schmidtz, and so on. All these thinkers are/were deeply concerned with understanding actual human nature, sociality, and reasoning. They all rely on empirical claims as both evidence and starting points for their normative and theoretical enquiry.

Not all political philosophers see their work as relating directly to or being grounded in empirical claims, though. The most striking case is probably Gerald Cohen (2003) who argued that many, if not most, principles related to political philosophy are independent of the facts. His argument is somewhat convoluted and it is hard to assess exactly what the implication of his view is (especially given the distinction he introduces between “principles” and “rules of regulation”), but this argument combined with his similar arguments against constructivism (2008) amount to a rejection of the claim that political philosophy is inherently practically focused and embedded in the empirical. David Estlund (2008, 264) has gone further, endorsing “hopeless” political theory that may have “no practical value.” His approach is also distinctive in that it, in a rejection of one of the core traditions in political philosophy, rejects the importance of understanding human nature, psychology, and rationality for political theory (Estlund 2011; 2019). David Enoch (2011; 2013), along similar lines, has argued that political philosophy is downstream from moral philosophy, which is itself factual, but in some sort of non-empirical way (Enoch 2011, 102). This argument relies on a curious version of an indispensability argument in favor of moral facts, which combined with some creative claims about metaphysics, results in a defense of moral facts as non-natural but still, in some otherwise mysterious sense, real and objective. These moral facts serve as the basis of normative political principles (Enoch 2013).

Regardless of the specifics, the main objection to empirical political philosophy relies on seeing political philosophy as a branch of what amounts to applied moral philosophy. Moral philosophy, on this view is independent of empirical concerns, making its application similarly independent. There is much to say in response to this general approach to political philosophy and much has been said recently in the context of what is often called the “ideal theory” debate (Gaus 2016; Sen 2009; Stemplowska 2008; Schmidtz 2011; Simmons 2010; Wiens 2012; Valentini 2012), so it is not my intention to address

this question directly here. In any case, the mainstream of political philosophers from Plato and Aristotle to Hobbes and Rawls have all concerned themselves with empirical reality in their theories to a greater or lesser degree. In that sense, political philosophy is more obviously at home in a thoroughly empirical worldview than some other parts of philosophy. If this is right, then political philosophers should make sure they are familiar with the main empirical tools useful for investigating the social and political realm.

In the next two sections, I argue that there are two general approaches to experimental political philosophy, what I will call the “experimental philosophy of politics” approach and the “integrated approach.” In practice, these approaches may often overlap, but it is worth looking at them separately to highlight the key features of each. The integrative approach is, as I argue, is preferable since it is both more clearly integrated into the mainstream of economics and political science and more likely to be fruitful in the sense of making progress on political questions.

## **2. Experimental Philosophy of Politics**

In experimental philosophy, it is common to distinguish between the “negative” and “positive” program. Both rely on the background assumption, common in most analytic philosophy, that intuitions are evidence in favor or against philosophical claims. The positive program uses experimental results to understand folk theories in philosophy and to establish basic philosophical claims (Alexander, Mallon, and Weinberg 2010). The negative program uses experimental data to show that the intuitions used as evidence by other philosophers are not trustworthy because they are not stable over different contexts and in different demographic groups. Thomas Nadelhoffer and Eddy Nahmias (2007) further subdivide this into three experimental projects: experimental analysis, experimental descriptivism, and experimental restrictionism. The first two roughly correspond to the positive project and third with the negative.

What they call “Experimental Analysis” is the project of using experimental data rather than common sense intuitions as evidence for or against philosophical views. In addition, many experimental philosophers are also concerned with the source of those views and the cognitive processes that generate one judgement rather than another. They believe it is “not only important to investigate what folk intuitions actually are, but it is

also important to try to determine how these intuitions are generated (Nadelhoffer and Nahmias 2007, 127).” They do this in order to “use the evidence to show that certain philosophical theories do not comport with what we are learning about how the mind works (2007, 127).” The example they give of this kind of project is Josh Greene’s work using neuro-imaging (fMRI) to examine the way the brain works when subjects make moral judgments in classic dilemma cases from moral philosophy to develop a dual-process model of moral judgement (J. Greene et al. 2004; J. Greene 2008; J. Greene and Haidt 2002). Another example would be Jonathan Haidt’s work on social intuitionism (Haidt 2001). In both cases, experiments help motivate a model of moral decision-making, while also helping to test aspects of that model.

We can see this approach as being traditional philosophy waged by other means. The radical change involved is not so much in philosophical method as in a change of what counts as good or acceptable evidence for philosophical claims and theories. Within the context of experimental analysis, we can follow Alexander, Mallon, and Weinberg (2010) in distinguishing between *mentalism* and *extra-mentalism*. The distinction here relates to the target of analysis. If experimental data about what people think about free will is used as direct evidence in favor of this or that theory of free will, it is a form of extra-mentalism. The experimental data is evidence in favor of or against a claim about the world, not about people’s views about the world.<sup>3</sup>

The negative program, or Experimental Restrictionism, uses experimental data to undermine or restrict the use of intuitions as philosophical evidence. This approach has proven to be extremely powerful in undermining many preciously held philosophical beliefs, but this power raises important philosophical questions. The negative program not only undermines traditional, intuition-based philosophy, it also potentially undermines many of the claims and strategies of the positive program of experimental philosophy. As Alexander, Mallon, and Weinberg (2010) argue, this means that we need to be clear about a number of meta-philosophical questions before we can know whether the experimental revolution will effectively eat its own.

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<sup>3</sup> Justin Sytsma and Jonathan Livengood (2015)

The question for us is how political philosophy fits into this framework. I think there is a clear disanalogy between political philosophy and many other areas of philosophy that makes the positive/negative and mental/extra-mental division less important. Political philosophy, especially but not only in the context of democratic politics, cannot typically ignore what people think about political matters or how they come to their political judgments. Because of this, the positive and negative program may often go together in experimental political philosophy.

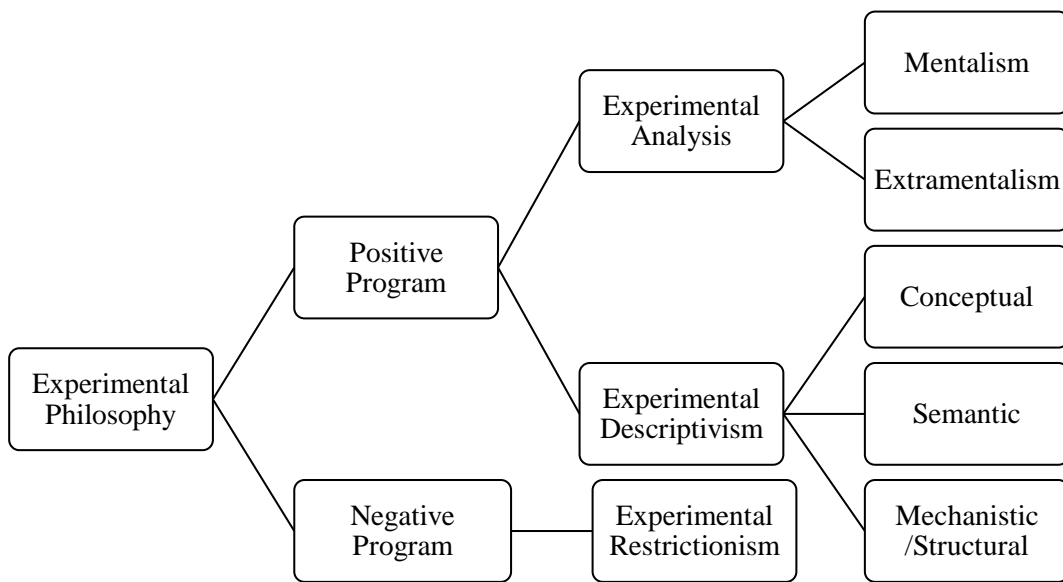


Figure 1—Taxonomy of Traditional Experimental Philosophy

Matthew Lindauer (2020) argues that the positive program in experimental moral and political philosophy should focus on what he calls the “fruitfulness” of moral and political concepts. By “fruitfulness,” Lindauer (2020, 2132) means “how well they help us to solve practical problems, problems that we inevitably face as human beings.” Political and moral philosophy, on this view, have an irreducibly practical role, or at least that most



political and moral philosophers are implicitly or explicitly committed to their practicality.<sup>4</sup> Lindauer argues that there are five ways of thinking about the general idea of fruitfulness for normative concepts: motivation, prevention, resilience, consensus, and guidance. There is some overlap here; questions of motivational potential or the plausibility of consensus will certainly bear on the question of how a concept provides normative guidance, for instance. Crucial to this approach is that idea that philosophers not only draw on experimental results in their research, but that they also participate in designing and running experiments:

On my view, evaluating the fruitfulness of normative concepts is part of the enterprise of doing moral and political philosophy. But conducting empirical research to determine the fruitfulness of these concepts and assessing the relevance of this research to philosophical debates are activities that involve attention to distinctions and subtleties that generally requires philosophical training. An important upshot of my view is that moral and political philosophers must be actively involved in conducting empirical research that will help us to ascertain whether particular normative concepts are fruitful ones (Lindauer 2020, 2148).

This is an important point, and I think an absolutely correct one. As I will argue below, I think this point is true not only of lab experiments but also of empirical research relevant to political philosophy more generally. After all, what can they know of political philosophy who only political philosophy know?

Some have argued that experimental philosophy should be used in a larger process of conceptual engineering understood as Carnapian explication (Shepherd and Justus 2015; Wakil 2021). Both the project of conceptual engineering generally and the project of Carnapian explication more specifically aim at developing a potentially revisionary conceptual framework for science. Conceptual engineering or “prescriptive conceptual

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<sup>4</sup> As Lindauer notes, some political and moral philosophers reject the central practical nature of moral and political concept, most notably Gerald Cohen (2003; 2008), David Enoch (2011; 2013), and David Estlund (2011; 2019), but they are in the extreme minority.

analysis” (Machery 2017, 213–14), takes ordinary language concepts and attempts to transform them into more precise and fruitful concepts. As Carnap (1962, 1) describes the process:

By an explication we understand the transformation of an inexact, prescientific concept, the explicandum, into an exact concept, the explicatum. The explicatum must fulfill the requirements of similarity to the explicandum, exactness, fruitfulness, and simplicity.

Prescriptive conceptual analysis may also be explicitly revisionary, aiming to construct a concept based on other evaluative categories. Sally Haslanger’s (2000) normative conceptual revisionism is an example. Machery (2017, 217) calls this second form of prescriptive conceptual analysis “Gramscian” after the Italian Marxist who believed that redefining the core concepts of social life was essential undermining bourgeois cultural hegemony.

Whatever its form, prescriptive conceptual analysis attempts to engineer a conceptual scheme as kind of ideal language. Experimental philosophy, on this view, is useful either as a way of developing the material for explication or for testing the fruitfulness of revisionary concepts. As Jonah Schupbach (2017) argues, formal model building and specification can use experimental results to test different formal explications against one another. This method may have particular salience for political philosophers who typically use the formal tools of economics to generate models of, for instance, impartial choice. These models can then be deployed in experimental conditions to see which better align with the choices of real individuals.

Early and influential experiments in political philosophy, adopts something like this method by asking subjects in a lab setting to choose, as if they are choosing in John Rawls’(1971) original position (Yaari and Bar-Hillel 1984; Frohlich, Oppenheimer, and Eavey 1987). Frohlich et. al. (1987; 1990; 1993) discovered that Rawls was correct that significant convergence, even unanimity over a particular conception of justice would emerge in the original position, just not over justice as fairness. The option most like justice as fairness, “Maximize the Floor” is the least popular option among subjects, while

“Maximizing the average with a Floor” a constrained utilitarian principle is by far the most popular. Many have thought that this finding undermines the plausibility of Rawls’ theory (Miller 1992; 2001; Schmitz 2006).

This work has spawned a massive literature. Some have refined this basic approach in terms of choice in the original position (Michelbach et al. 2003; Mitchell et al. 2003; Bruner and Lindauer 2018; Bruner 2018; Inoue, Zenkyo, and Sakamoto 2021), while other have looked at distributive justice, fair division, and impartial choice more generally (Scott et al. 2001; Schneider and Krämer 2004; Konow 2000; 2001; 2009). There is also a considerable literature on fair division and bargaining that goes beyond the Rawlsian model of the original position, often relying ultimatum games or public good games (For a good review, see Roth 2020).

Behavioral testing of Rawls’s claim that representatives in the original position would choose his unique conception of justice—justice as fairness—is possible and potentially fruitful since Rawls claims that the principles of justice are not only the unique rational choice in the original position, but also that they are more compatible with actual human moral psychology than alternatives like utilitarianism. If rational choosers, in a similar set up, choose different principles, this suggests that either Rawls is wrong about the rationality of the principles or that experimental subjects are somehow disanalogous from the representatives in the original position, either because their rationality is different or because the choice situation is different. Since, as Rawls (1971, 15–16) argues:

[O]ne conception of justice is more reasonable than another, or justifiable with respect to it, if rational persons in the initial situation would choose its principles over those of the other for the role of justice. Conceptions of justice are to be ranked by their acceptability to persons so circumstanced. Understood in this way the question of justification is settled by working out a problem of deliberation: we have to ascertain which principles it would be rational to adopt given the contractual situation. This connects the theory of justice with the theory of rational choice.

This last sentence expresses the core idea of both Rawls’ contractualism and contractarian theories generally (Gaus and Thrasher 2015).

A different approach uses experimental results as the basic data for descriptive rather than prescriptive conceptual analysis. Rather than engineering concepts for use in an ideal language, this approach uses ordinary platitudes as the starting point of conceptual analysis. Instead of generating these platitudes from the intuitions of philosophers, however, this approach uses experimental data. This data can then act as the first stage in a “Canberra Plan” (Jackson 2000) style or “ecological” (Ulatowski 2017) approach to descriptive conceptual analysis. The “Canberra” account of norms developed by Geoffrey Brennan, Lina Eriksson, Robert Goodin, and Nicholas Southwood (Brennan et al. 2013) is a sophisticated example of the conceptual analysis of norms. One could imagine work being done in this territory on political concepts like coercion, rights, harm, etc.

### **3. Integrative Experimental Political Philosophy**

While experimental results can be useful in developing concepts for prescriptive analysis or conceptual engineering, this is not the only or even perhaps the most valuable reason for submitting political concepts to the experimental treatment. Cristina Bicchieri’s (2006; 2016) work on social norms is a good example of what I will call the “integrative” approach to experimental political philosophy that is not primarily concerned with doing conceptual analysis by other means. While it can be seen as a form of experimental prescriptive analysis, doing so ignores many of the important features of the work. Instead, we should see her work and much other work in experimental political philosophy as diverging from the traditional methods of conceptual analysis and experimental philosophy and instead as embracing the general method of social scientific explanation. This is what I call the *integrative* approach to experimental political philosophy. It is integrative in that it draws on all the tools of social science and philosophy in order to answer philosophical problems.

Using Bicchieri’s work as an example, we can see that her goal is not primarily to give an analysis of the concept of a norm or social norms. Rather, she is using ideas drawn from philosophy and economics to construct a model of norms that she can then test with experiments. The importance of norms, for her, arose as a solution to a puzzle relating to equilibrium selection in cooperative games (Bicchieri 1997, chap. 6). Most coordination and cooperative games do not have a unique solution. David Lewis (1969) offered his theory of convention as a way of explaining equilibrium selection in pure coordination

games, though the exact mechanism for generating conventions was largely left open. In mixed-motive problems of coordination and cooperation, the problem is even harder, however. Given that we see largely stable solutions to these mixed-motive coordination problems, we need an explanation for stable equilibrium selection.

To solve this problem, Bicchieri develops the idea of norms as equilibria that have specific stability and existence properties. Namely, that they are Nash equilibria that rely on common expectations with expectations for punishment of non-compliance. In subsequent work, she used experiments to show how these social norms could be used to transform social dilemmas into mixed-motive games (Bicchieri 2002; 2006, chap. 4), explain the stability (and instability) of fairness in bargaining and distributional settings (Bicchieri 1999; 2008; Bicchieri and Chavez 2010), how unpopular norms can remain stable over time (Bicchieri and Fukui 1999; Bicchieri 2006, chap. 5; 2016), and how trust and trustworthiness relate to norms (Bicchieri, Xiao, and Muldoon 2011).

In this work she and her collaborators not only refine the idea of a norm, but they have also discovered contextual and substantive differences between types of norms and their functions. This goes beyond what is possible in traditional conceptual analysis and the fruitfulness of this approach suggests that this kind of approach is generally better than alternative approaches (e.g., the “Canberra” theory of norms). Which is not to say that there is no value to other approaches to norms, even if they are less fruitful. For instance, the “Canberra” theory foregrounds some important aspects of norms that are not as prominent in Bicchieri’s approach, as I have argued elsewhere (Gaus and Thrasher 2021, chap. 7). Nevertheless, the power of using operationalizable concepts in conjunction with empirical hypothesis testing is undeniable.

The work of Oliver Curry and his collaborators is also instructive here. Though not “political” in a narrow sense, Curry, et.al. are concerned with understanding morality understood as interpersonal rules that govern social life. In this sense, they are engaged in investigating what Gerald Gaus called “social morality,” the structure of norms and rules that serve as a foundation for social cooperation and political life. In a series of papers (Curry, Mullins, and Whitehouse 2019; Curry, Jones Chesters, and Van Lissa 2019), Curry and his collaborators used existing experimental data and moral theories to develop a model of “Morality-as-Cooperation” and test it in several different societies. They draw on the

work of the moral and political philosopher David Gauthier as well as the moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt. The interesting feature of this approach, and its antecedents like Haidt's Moral Foundations Theory, is that it is not really testing the validity of moral concepts in the traditional way. Rather, it is using philosophical theory as a starting point for developing a model of morality and then using experiments to test the hypotheses that the model generates.

One of the distinctive aspects of this integrative approach and a feature that joins it methodologically to the main approach in the natural and social sciences is its use of "models." Traditional conceptual analysis, be it experimental or not, is not seeking a model of some social phenomenon such as "justice" or "morality." Rather, it is seeking a definition in the sense of trying to find necessary and sufficient conditions for a thing. To explain something through analysis of this sort is to identify the meaning of a thing in some fundamental sense. A model, in the sciences, is not an attempt to completely describe a phenomena or thing, rather a model is representation of the target phenomena of interest that the model constructs as part of a larger strategy of explanation or justification. Michael Weisberg (2006, 624) explains:

Model building or modeling is the indirect representation and analysis of a real-world phenomenon using a model. It takes place in three stages: In the first, a theorist constructs a model, typically by writing down a mathematical description of this model. In the second, she analyzes the model, looking for characteristic behaviors such as equilibria, oscillations, regions of stability, etc. Finally, if warranted by the problem of interest the modeler assesses the relationship between the model and real-world phenomena.

Crucially, all models are in a fundamental sense false; at best they represent reality indirectly but always with some important falsification and idealization. Models are useful because they allow us to isolate elements of the target phenomenon and to focus on crucial elements of the target that are important to the questions that concern the modeler. Modeling is a practical enterprise and good models may not always exhibit the same features. They should, however, allow us to generate better hypotheses about the target as

well as better ways to test those claims. Models, then, are judged by their fruitfulness, not by their accuracy.

We can see now why “fruitfulness” as a standard of concepts in experimental philosophy can lead us directly to modeling and away from conceptual analysis. Political philosophical theories generate testable hypothesis, either on their own or because of the models that they rely on. The goal here is to understand the political world through hypothesis testing, with the secondary project being one of model building and taxonomy for the purpose of hypothesis testing. There are powerful tools and experimental paradigms to be found in experimental and behavioral economics for political philosophers to mine and to work within; an excellent overview of how experimental and behavioral economics can be used by philosophers can be found in (Rubin, O’Connor, and Bruner 2019).

Again, this makes the experimental political philosophical project no different, in principle, from various other projects in the natural and social sciences. The only difference is the substance of the questions at issue and the hypotheses that are tested. As such, this makes experimental political philosophy of this sort especially apt for use in the interdisciplinary pursuit of what has become known as Philosophy, Politics, and Economics (PPE). One generally unappreciated reason why is that this approach opens up not only the scope of experimentation but also the methods available, meaning that “natural experiments” or non-lab experiments may also be useful. This possibility will be explored in the next section.

#### **4. Non-Experimental Empirical Tools**

The most powerful way to test a hypothesis is a randomized lab experiment, but for many of the questions that concern political philosophers this is isn’t a possible, ethical, or affordable option. In addition to lab experiments, though, political philosophers can use the evidence of history and economic and institutional data in conjunction with abstract models to test their claims. History and existing data do not, in themselves, help us to isolate the most important causal factors that may concern us, however. Communism has generally led to misery and repression most places it has been tried, but we cannot infer from this alone that communism causes misery and repression. Afterall, the societies that tended to adopt communism were already poor and often had dysfunctional and/or colonial,

extractive institutions, maybe things were so bad to begin with that communism didn't uniquely make them worse. Selection bias may be the best explanation. To establish causal links rigorously in a way that can help us adjudicate basic political questions will require us to find ways to distinguish true causal connections from spurious correlation and selection bias.

We obviously can't run lab experiments on what the effects of communism or capitalism will be on whole societies. Using historical data and econometric analysis to make causal identification is a way of doing experimental political philosophy by using "natural" experiments rather than controlled experiments. The main problem is that historical data is not randomly assigned into different treatments the way it would be in a controlled experiment. But sometimes we can investigate the data and use events as natural experiments that can function as "as good as random" assignment. This can allow us to make causal inferences from what may initially look like merely descriptive or correlation data. This is possible because of the tools developed by economists for causal identification that emerged out of the so-called "credibility revolution" of the last several decades (Angrist and Pischke 2010). The main strategy here is a causal identification strategy that makes use of the tools of OLS regressions, instrumental variables, regression discontinuity design, difference in difference, and synthetic controls to find and measure the causal influence of some set of experimental variables on an outcome variable.<sup>5</sup> Increasingly causal identification strategies are developed with the use of causal maps in the form of directed acyclic graphs (DAGs) like the one below.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For a good introduction to the use of these techniques, see (Angrist and Pischke 2009; Cunningham 2020).

<sup>6</sup> On DAGS, see (Pearl, Glymour, and Jewell 2016; Pearl and Mackenzie 2018)



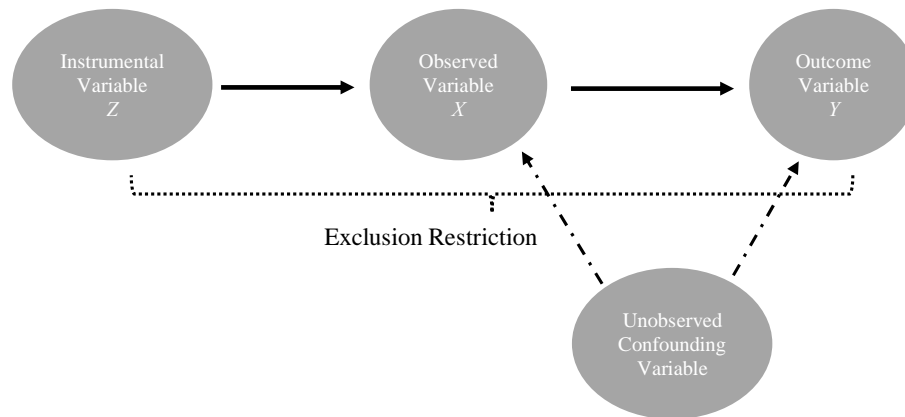


Figure 2—Directed Acyclical Graph (DAG) of a Simple Instrumental Variable

Instrumental variables approaches and related techniques like regression discontinuity and difference in difference analysis all rely on isolating strategies to reduce or eliminate unobserved variables responsible for selection bias or endogeneity. In effect, the point is to try to reverse engineer an experiment from data that already exists by creating “as good as random” assignment in the analysis. For example, an instrumental variable is something that causes the observation variable, but not the outcome variable. If there is an unobserved confounding variable or selection effect related to the observation variable, the IV can isolate this effect and by using a two-stage least squares analysis, the true effect of the observation variable on the outcome variable can be evaluated. A classic, though perhaps overused, example in the political science literature is the effect of rain on electoral outcomes. Whether or not it is raining should have no effect on who is elected in an election, but it will likely influence who decides to vote, which will in turn have an effect on who is elected.<sup>7</sup>

A dramatic use of an instrumental variable occurs in Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels’s influential *Democracy for Realists* (2016). Drawing on earlier research, they show that shark attacks occurring in 1916 on the New Jersey coast—the same attacks that inspired the novel and movie *Jaws*—had a crucial influence on electing Woodrow Wilson

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<sup>7</sup> For a close look at 127 IV studies using rain as the IV, see (Mellon 2021).

to the presidency. The conclusion that Achen and Bartels draw from this (and similar evidence) is that voters are irrational and cannot be relied upon to either prospectively or retrospectively discipline political behavior. This serves as a major pillar in the “realist” theory of democracy that they champion. This theory is, at root, a philosophical account of the normative status of democracy and how to evaluate democratic results. So, even though it is developed by political scientists, it stakes out important territory in the understanding of democracy in political philosophy. It’s justification, however, relies on a series of empirical claims and if those claims are called into question, the larger “realist” theory of democracy loses much of its support.

As with all IV studies, the crucial question is whether there is a violation of the “exclusion restriction” by the IV, i.e., whether the IV is somehow directly causally related to the outcome variable. If so, using the IV doesn’t solve the initial problem and may in fact replicate it at another level. Anthony Fowler and Andrew Hall (2018) argue that this is exactly what is going on in the shark attack example. There are reasons shark attacks and the perceived lack of response to them might affect how one views one’s political representatives. Further, the effect doesn’t replicate over the entire timeline of shark attacks in the area raising additional puzzles about the case. Achen and Bartels (2018), perhaps unsurprisingly, disagree with this assessment of their work. Whoever is right here, Achen and Bartels are surely correct when they argue at the end of their response piece that:

As the wisest statisticians have always recognized, persuasive empirical science does not come from applying abstract statistical considerations to poorly grasped research problems. Rather, it emerges from deep substantive knowledge in dialogue with relevant statistical theory...In our view, that kind of thinking, imperfect and provisional as always, represents the way forward for empirical political science (Achen and Bartels 2018, 1452).

An excellent example of work that integrates good statistics with a well-founded research problem can be found in the work of Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson on the long-term effects of different forms of colonialism. In their original paper, with Simon Johnson, they show that Europeans established extractive colonies in places where they did not

themselves settle (Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2001). This work relies on a clever identification strategy using instrumental variables. In later work they showed that well-functioning societies have inclusive rather than extractive institutions. Inclusive or open institutions tend to allow for creative destruction and dynamism which encourages economic growth, while societies with extractive institutions do not (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). Douglass North, John Wallis, and Barry Weingast (2009) come to a similar conclusion, though with a different explanation. Both research programs rely on analyzing historical data with econometric techniques and both are highly relevant to political philosophy.

This category of empirical politics is underutilized by philosophers and is largely left to economists and political scientists, but it need not be. Perhaps it is too much to expect political philosophers to become experts in econometric methods and causal identification, but it is also a mistake for philosophers to be ignorant of these powerful tools for hypothesis testing. As Lindauer (2020, 2148) argued in the context of lab experiments, philosophers should be active participants in hypothesis testing involving natural experiments. Only if philosophers are involved will we be able to draw attention to the specifically philosophical questions and models that generate the hypotheses that we care about. Interdisciplinary collaboration is crucial to making progress and one way this can proceed is under the aegis of the Philosophy, Politics, and Economics (PPE) movement. As with experimental methods, it will be important to educate the philosophical community on the importance and viability of empirical tools so that work relying on these techniques can be accepted within the philosophical mainstream. Philosophers need to take the time and effort to familiarize themselves with experimental and empirical methods from the social sciences in order to understand the key developments in adjacent fields as well as to contribute meaningfully and to even direct important research programs that can fruitfully address core questions in political philosophy.

## **5. Conclusion**

Experimental philosophy has both a methodological and substantive component. As a methodology, it aims to bring empirical methods to bear on traditional philosophical questions. As such, it seems to be a radical departure from traditional philosophical

methods that typically make use of *a priori* reasoning in the form of logical or conceptual arguments.

This methodological approach is not substantively neutral, though. Despite the differences in the views of experimental philosophers, all think that, as Josh Knobe and Shaun Nichols put it, they are “concerned with questions about how human beings actually happen to be” and that the “deepest questions of philosophy can only be properly addressed by immersing oneself in the messy, contingent, highly variable truths about how human beings actually are” (Knobe and Nichols 2008). Experimental philosophy relies on a kind of methodological naturalism that makes assumptions about how we learn about the world through experimentation and measurement.

Initially, this philosophical approach was developed and deployed by philosophers who by training or inclination were adjacent to psychology and cognitive science. They adopted methods drawn from psychology and cognitive science and argued both that we needed to understand what people believed as well as how the mind really works to get traction on many traditional philosophical questions in epistemology, philosophy of mind, and even ethics.<sup>8</sup>

It is a puzzling feature of the rise of experimental philosophy over the last several decades that political philosophy has never been integrated into the mainstream of experimental philosophical interest. Political philosophy, after all, seems to require knowledge about actual human nature and psychology. It is similarly puzzling that political philosophers have generally been slow to adopt experimental and other “naturalistic” methods. This is especially puzzling when one considers the general methodology of the great political philosophers of the past. Consider Hobbes’ claim at the end of the Introduction to *Leviathan*:

But let one man read another by his actions never so perfectly, it serves him onely with his acquaintance, which are but few. He that is to govern a whole Nation, must read in himselfe, not this, or that particular man; but Man-kind; which though it be hard to do, harder than to learn any Language, or Science; yet, when I shall have

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<sup>8</sup> Josh Knobe (2016) even argued that “experimental philosophy is cognitive science.”

set down my own reading orderly, and perspicuously, the pains left another, will be onely to consider, if he also find not the same in himselfe. For this kind of Doctrine, admitteth no other Demonstration (Hobbes 1651).

According to Hobbes, general knowledge of human nature and rationality is a pre-requisite for political philosophy. Rousseau states his problem, at the outset of *Du Contrat Social*, as “with men as they are and with laws as they could be, can there be in the civil order any sure and legitimate rule of administration?” (Rousseau 1762). But to know what “men as they are” are like and to know what laws could be, we surely need to know a considerable amount about actual human psychology, rationality, and motivation as well as the possible workings of political institutions.

It is likely that the experimental political philosophy revolution has not yet truly begun. It is relatively easy to, for instance, test claims impartial choice in the original position in the lab and this probably explains why this approach has remained fruitful. Most questions that interest political philosophers, however, are more complex than this and it is harder to see how to isolate key elements of a question or claim in such a way that it can benefit from empirical or experimental testing. We can’t simply take a question like “what makes a society dynamic” or “what institutions best promote the right kind of freedom” and apply an off the shelf experimental framework.<sup>9</sup> Instead, political philosophers will need to become more sophisticated in how to break their larger questions down into constituent parts so that the causal mechanism can be isolated and tested and so that models can be developed for key parts of the theory or question. Then empirical and experimental methods can be applied, where possible, to make progress. To do this well, political philosophers will need to spend a little more time with their cousins in political science and economics departments.

If I am right that the integrative approach to political philosophy is likely to be more fruitful than the traditional conceptual approach, then we should expect there to be low-hanging fruit just waiting to be picked by those who adopt this approach. Just

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<sup>9</sup> Thanks to Ryan Muldoon for making this point clear to me.

as the adoption of new formal methods at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century created the soil for the flowering of analytic philosophy, we should expect the integration of formal and empirical methods from the social sciences into political philosophy to lead to similar flowering.

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