Introduction

It's a pleasure to write a response to Keith Dowding's new book. In 2004 I was part of a roundtable with him and others debating interpretive approaches to the study of politics (Finlayson, Bevir, Rhodes, Dowding & Hay, 2004). I was broadly in favour and Dowding was sceptical. Since then I have continued to find his work on methodology a provocation and a challenge in the best way possible; he is unusual in being at home talking knowledgably not only about the use of models in political science and statistical methods of analysis but also analytic political philosophy and philosophy of science. If only we were all so broad-minded.

The Philosophy and Methods of Political Science is an impressive blend of political analysis with philosophy and theory. It develops and robustly defends an argument about the importance and value of prediction in political science and in so doing communicates a strong sense of its author. Reading it (what it says, does not say and the way it says it all) I was aware of being in the company of a distinct individual with distinct preoccupations, motivations and outlooks. Through that encounter I was able to reflect on my own preoccupations and motivations – those which are distinct from Dowding's but also, importantly, those we have in common as people professionally and personally concerned with politics, with what we can and can't usefully say about it and with how people might best intervene into their own political life.

I mention this because it is true and because it illustrates a way of analysing something. The historian and philosopher R.G. Collingwood argued that the study of history is always the study of thought; people in the past thought about what they wanted to do and how to do it and in studying them we can 're-enact' that thinking in our own mind. In so doing we gain knowledge of the past, of ourselves and of what it is to be a thinking thing. Dowding's book

may not be from a distant past but it can be read in a Collingwood sort of a way: we can think along with him, seeing his purposes and motivations; we can follow his argument and also the reasons behind his wanting to make it in that way, right here and right now.

Why would we want to do any of that?

I can think of three main sorts of reason. Firstly (and in contrast to most forms of analytic philosophy) because we think that it is through such encounters with other people, and through reflection upon the experience, that we start to philosophise. From this point of view, trying to understand what others thought they were doing whenever they did it (and reflecting on the possibilities and impossibilities of such understanding) produces a distinct form of knowledge and is a contribution social science can make to philosophy and to human life in general. Secondly, because we might think of this as a valuable ethical activity: learning how to understand other people, seeing them as thinking beings, as ends in themselves and not only means to the end of generating research findings. From this perspective political science is part of a broader endeavour of the sort that Cicero would have put under the name of '*humanitas*' – the cultivation of personal and public virtue including an understanding of, and care for, that which makes us distinctly human.

A third reason for this kind of analysis – and the one with which I am most concerned – is that in recreating in our own minds the thinking or the 'logic' of others we may develop our understanding not only of what they think and of how they think it but also of the context within which such things are thought (and, perhaps, have to be thought). From this point of view Dowding's book is evidence not only of who he is and of what he is like but also of the 'lifeworld' he (and we) inhabit - the complex of routine, 'taken-for-granted' meanings, ways of thinking and habitual practices which currently make up a particular kind of activity such

as political science, academia or textbook writing and which are themselves parts of a particular society at a particular moment in time. An improved understanding of all that is a necessary prelude to intervening into it.

Ideas in History

With this in mind I want to take issue with Dowding's discussion of the historian of political thought Quentin Skinner. In a section headed 'Interpreting the Work of Dead People' Dowding explains Skinner's approach by reducing it to the identification of authorial intentions. This enables him to introduce a particular distinction and a concomitant division of intellectual labour - between the historian of ideas who 'needs to understand what motivated the author' (and so is interested in the political issues of that time) and the political philosopher for whom 'what is more important is how these words speak to the issues of our day' (2016: 220-221). In showing how our concepts are shaped by past interpretations and carry with them 'normative baggage', historians of ideas are an ancillary service for the proper philosophers: their 'investigation into how terms change their meaning, carrying their moral connotations with them, enhances the weapons of the analytic philosopher' (2016: 221).

I think that this underplays the extent and significance of what the historical study of political ideas and concepts reveals: that having a history is part of what a political idea is and that to have such an idea is also to be engaged with that history. As I have already indicated, interpretive approaches are concerned with 'self-understanding' of individuals and of the historical communities and cultures of which we are a part. Human beings are 'thrown into' a world of meanings, values, institutions and structures that simultaneously constrain and make possible their thinking and acting. A fundamental part of the 'critical attitude' we associate

with Enlightenment is the struggle to become aware of the conditioning effects of such institutions and structures (a struggle made difficult by the fact that we must form that attitude from within them). The point of historical research is not simply to cleanse concepts of 'normative baggage' but to understand the ways in which we are part of our own conceptual history and to identify the historical limits to our thinking which we might then seek to overcome (see Foucault, 1984).

Within Political Studies this sort of approach has enabled the specification of a distinct object of study: a particular form or dimension of political activity, which Michael Freeden describes as 'the political thinking *actually* taking place within political entities: the thinking produced by human beings in their political capacity as decision-makers, option-rankers, dissent and conflict regulators, support-mobilizers and vision creators; and the thinking consumed by them in that capacity' (2005: 115). Such thinking and speaking – as Skinner's research shows – takes place using the vocabulary, and within the genres of thought and communication, available to people who nevertheless make decisions about which words to use and in what order, how to arrange concepts, how to combine them or break them apart. Skinner's work – as he has made very clear - is neither antiquarianism nor a way of sterilising concepts but an attempt to 'illuminate the varying roles played by intellectual factors in political life…to begin to establish the connections between the world of ideology and the world of political action' (1974: 280) and to investigate 'the process of ideological formation and change' (1974: 283).

This – it seems to me – is also a theory of what political action is (or at least of a part of what it is). Political actors (often if not always) have to work out what to think and do and then explain it to others. They have to do so (often if not always) in ways that those others might accept as legitimate. Skinner has particularly focused on the use and dissemination by 'innovating

ideologists' of 'descriptive-evaluative' terms which locate ideas and actions within a framework of moral approbation or disapprobation. Some of us take a broader view and look at more varied kinds of rhetorical political action – the ways in which political actors develop and deploy different kinds of argument or proof in constraining contexts, including the constraining logic of their own ideological and rhetorical positions (see, for example, Finlayson and Martin, 2008; Finlayson, 2012). Skinner has himself become more explicit about his interest in rhetoric and political change (2002: Chapter 10).

A politician's speech, an academic article and a philosophical discussion are different kinds of thing but they all come from and feed back into the same historical 'lifeworld' and each may have important political effects. Concepts such as the 'state of nature' or the 'original position' were formed as parts of wider philosophical-political argument and they have contributed to our political history. To purify them of this history would not be to make them better concepts but to remove from them that which makes them important and interesting for political theory and political science. Furthermore, in examining how, why and with what effects such concepts are developed and disseminated we certainly should not confine ourselves to the canon of historical political theory. Other important cases might be concepts such as voter preference, veto-player and the spatial model. These are not only concepts of political science but also political concepts. They have become part of the vocabulary of some political actors and contribute to the ways in which they understand and shape their intentions, undertake their acts and reflect on them – affecting what Ian Hacking, calls 'acting under a description' (1995: 234-237). Sometimes the ideas and findings of political science are not causal explanations but (in shaping others' self-understanding) actual causes.

Governing Concepts

Given the potential for ideas and concepts to have such effects, the management or governance of their creation and dissemination is a fundamental matter of and for politics. It is always worth remembering that our tradition begins with Plato as an argument concerning how society must be if it is to enable the form of thought and speech which (he thinks) can establish what is just (and suppress the forms of poetry, music and rhetoric which might counter it); and with Aristotle's claim that politics is 'the most authoritative art' because it 'ordains which of the sciences should be studied in a state, and which each class of citizens should learn and up to what point they should learn them' (*Ethics*, 1, 1, 1094b). We might say that politics is all about who gets to say what to whom and how: differentiating and containing forms of knowledge production; establishing and maintaining procedures for judging the adequacy, accuracy and stylistic appropriateness of claims to knowledge; dealing with those who transgress the epistemological or ethical boundaries.

Dowding's book is concerned to do just this sort of thing (as a textbook should – this is not by itself a criticism). At the end he reflects on what it might be to conduct ourselves virtuously in our profession but before then he has pointed out various things which might be symptomatic of vice: lack of concern for truth, seeking a reputation by being dramatic, daring or rude (2016: 244-5); attachment to 'isms' and their use as labels which substitute for critique (2016: 12); postmodernism (2016: 22-3); Foucault (2016: 222). What these have in common (on Dowding's reckoning) is insufficient precision in their terminology and argumentation, which is in turn caused – he claims - by inability or refusal sufficiently to separate themselves from the world they want to talk about. For Dowding, political scientists should 'step back' (2016: 247) from politics. In order to break from mere opinion (to develop nuanced beliefs based on assessments of probabilities backed by evidence) we must separate ourselves from activities such as political journalism, public policy and politics itself (2016: 243), overcome our desire to hang onto our opinions and let go of prejudices which might otherwise 'infect' our research

(2016: 245). Thus the book is concerned with making and maintaining the distinctions and establishing the rules and conventions of thought and expression which can keep political science as free as possible from such infection. This involves, for example, separating the study of conventions, moral rules, institutions and languages from the taking of decisions about which of these might be changed and how. The first is a job for political science, the latter a task for political philosophy. Political science might study contestation over how to live but it cannot itself participate in it.

As I've already said my own view is that political science is always a part of such contestation (although what kind of a part isn't always clear). Because of this fact Dowding has to go to some effort to maintain the divisions of labour he proposes as well as specifying the nature, and restricting the applicability, of the concepts each field employs. While accepting that in political science there 'really is no point in trying to provide necessary and sufficient conditions to characterise entities for all times and places' (2016: 190) he nevertheless, relying on the authority of Kripke, argues that we can designate the necessary meaning of some concepts such that their use is stable and agreed (at least for a given and specific purpose (2016: 191)). Such concepts must also conform to a number of rules. They should be as primitive as possible (i.e. basic and not dependent on other concepts), non-normative and simplified, ready for application to empirical cases (with a view to identifying the kinds of patterns which enable prediction). Meanwhile, in political philosophy – which has the job of establishing not 'what people think but what they should think' (2016: 224) - we should strive to 'define our concepts in a manner that is as non-normative as possible' so as to 'enable greater commensurability in debate across moral theories' (2016: 212, 227). Concepts should conform to everyday usage (2016: 225) and 'in sharpening our vocabulary we should not change the moral force of terms' (2016: 226) and draw on formal methods which have the

merit that 'contradictions or incoherencies are less likely to be hidden than with the more literary and expansive styles' (2016: 226-7).

One can see how this approach to concepts is somewhat at variance with that which I presented in relation to historical studies of ideas and concepts. One might say that the variance is minimal or irrelevant in that Dowding is talking about how we form and use concepts in political science and not the concepts in use in political life. In that case all I am saying is that there is a need and a value for a historically (and rhetorically) informed ideational dimension to political science. But I think I am saying more than that. Dowding wants to develop concepts that are as normatively neutral as possible in order to use them to make predictive sense of politics. But political-science concepts come from and go back into the same 'world' as do the concepts which are part of politics – the world of our time, our place, our hierarchies of people, power and knowledge. What he proposes is not non-normative but a normative proposition about how to organise and govern these things. I am not opposed to such government but I do think there is a risk that without some hermeneutical self-criticism the concepts we invent in political science will be reflections of the world as it happens to be right now but appear objective precisely because they are homologous with the social world as it currently is. We will be governed without knowing it and reify present behaviours as necessary rather than show them as part of what a famous philosopher once called the 'ensemble' of current 'social relations' (Marx, 1938[1845]).

The difference between us is that Dowding wants to take a 'step back' in order to be able to say what he (and we) hope will be true things about politics. This requires the introduction of rules or conventions to govern the claims made by scientists and philosophers, manage the borders between fields and claims of different sorts, and adjudicate the appropriateness of the styles in which such claims are expressed. For me such a project of refinement of the

scientific instruments we will use to examine the world is – to steal a line from Hegel – like refusing to go into the water before one has learned to swim (1975: 14). We are already in the water and there is no dry land to swim to on which we might take a step back. The only choices are to swim deeper, faster and further trying to become more aware of the water around us and more conscious of the fact that we are swimming in it (aware that the truth of what we have to say about swimming is always a practical and historical as well as a theoretical problem).

Political Science, one might say, needs to avoid all forms of hydrophobia. In a textbox - headed 'interpreting in the sea of verbiage' – Dowding takes time out for a sideswipe at Foucault. He mentions the philosopher's 'important contribution' (2016: 223) but also says that Foucault wrote in an obscure way and did so deliberately (the former an aesthetic experience I've never had and the second a claim proven by reference to a well-worn anecdote simply accepted at face value). Clearly Dowding considers Foucault an exemplar of the virtue-free thinker - someone who wanted to be a 'cult figure' and whose style involves spattering 'unintelligible garbage with some trivial truths'. He recommends to students that they 'read Foucault quickly...life is too short to bother about trying to interpret impenetrable nonsense' (2016: 222). This is a particularly explicit moment in which the book doesn't take a step back and strive for non-normative thinking but engages in arbitrary intellectual policing. Foucault is declared out of bounds stylistically, ethically and epistemologically and someone from whom students must be protected.[1] I think that's a shame not least because Foucault is one of those who can help us to understand and act in relation to the politics of knowledge with which our field is so enmeshed. The enemy to good thinking isn't Foucault – it's the

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[1] Dowding ends the book by suggesting that citation rates 'are as good a guide to what we think important interesting and true in political science as anything else'. A 2016 study of citations in (English language) social science found books by Foucault to be the 7th and 11th most cited in the field (Green, 2016). No other author has more than one entry in the top twenty-five.

kind of contemporary political opinion journalism and self-interested policy advocacy from which Dowding seeks to distance political science. The rise to dominance of these discourses and modes of communication (and the displacement of intellectual and scientific authorities) is a historic and social fact which we are all trying to explain and respond to. Rather than turn on each other we might gain a lot from, for example, Foucault's studies of the history of forms of knowledge and of 'governmentality'.

Conclusion: The Politics of Politics

Throughout the book Dowding is rather silent on the question of what in fact it is that we study. Most of the time the answer to the question of the object of our science is only implicit in references to things like voting, legislatures and so on. In the last chapter Dowding says of political science that he does not think 'there is much worth in defining it at length. It depends on what you are interested in examining'. Politics, he says, can be understood narrowly or broadly 'as concerned only with matters of the state or polity or as expressed in virtually any set of human interactions'. He even says that he has 'no real concern if we want to go with a narrow definition concerning only political communities, leaving the rest to sociology or economics' (2016: 243).

I think we require more reflection than this. It makes a lot of difference (not only to theory and method but also to actual politics) if we confine our scope to the state or expand it to all human interactions. Here, I think, we might turn to 'post-foundational' political theories which make an important and valuable distinction between 'politics' and the 'political'; between the 'ontic' aspects of politics – the specific ways in which people contest with each other – and the 'ontology' of that contest itself - the constitution of the field of battle (see Marchart, 2007). An analogy might be the difference between those who study football – the

different styles of play, the factors which suggest a team is more or less likely to win, the way changes to the rules have made or might make the game better or worse - and those who study what sport is and who want to know how it is that football came about, how it came to be a particularly dominant sport, how it relates to (and what are its effect upon) all the other kinds of sport (including those which we have not yet thought of). There certainly are all sorts of rules and practices within football which can be studied and understood in an objective way. But those rules and practices themselves have no objective foundation; they are the contingent outcome of ongoing historical activities (including the objective study of the rules). While we cannot think entirely apart from such a history we can cultivate awareness of its conditioning effects and so also a degree of self-awareness, as well as a capacity to take ethical and political responsibility for the relationship we have to the present of that history. It seems to me that Dowding is mostly concerned with politics (and we know from his work that he has interesting, important and useful things to say about it). But attention only to politics can falsely depoliticise the relationship of political science to the political dimensions of the lifeworld of which it is a part. That makes it harder for us to develop the kind of self-awareness needed if we are to assess how the claims we as political scientists make and put into practice authorise some forms of knowledge and disqualify others or – importantly – fail to authorise and disqualify. It also makes it harder to see the politics of our science and the ways in which we might take responsibility for them as scholars, teachers and citizens.

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