Methodology, Hermeneutic Phenomenology, and Political Theory

Introduction

One consequence of the success of the scientific method in the natural sciences has been a fallacy of authority in other disciplines. The fallacy of authority is when an authority on one subject is treated as an authority on an entirely different subject, one in which they are, in fact, not an authority. The idea that the social sciences ought to emulate the natural sciences is a kind of fallacy of authority. The fallacy is that one methodology, which is appropriate for a particular type of research program, is deemed appropriate for other research programmes. The authority figure in this case is not a person, but a methodology. This is not to say that a range of fundamentally different types of questions could not be addressed by recourse to the methodology of the natural sciences, but it is a fallacy to presume that all can. The corollary that questions which cannot be addressed by naturalist methods have no place in the social sciences is grounded in this fallacy. However, many within the social sciences have accepted the fallacy, even when challenging it. It is in this context that we find what I would describe as a kind of methodological paranoia. If social scientists do not sound scientific — so the goes this psychosis — they are not doing science. What is meant by science in this context is a variant of an empirically grounded positivism that tries to replicate naturalist methods, and if we are to sound scientific we need a suitable scientifically sounding language.¹ Brian Fay made a similar argument

¹ I am distinguishing here between methods and methodology. Michael Crotty defines methods as “the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyse data related to some research question or hypothesis”; whereas methodology is defined as “the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying being the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcome.” Michael Crotty, The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process (London: Sage, 2013), 3. Sheldon Wolin offers a historically informed explanation. Method used to be understood as a way of doing things, and it was with Descartes that method included the idea of “the progression of knowledge”, and, importantly, that the rational method was about discipline or control in order to compensate for the “unfortunate proclivities of the mind.” Sheldon S. Wolin, "Political Theory as Vocation," The American Political Science Review 63, no. 4 (1969): 1067. The consequence was that method, in the Cartesien sense was also tied to his “fear of disorder.” Ibid., 1068. In this sense, the distinction between method and methodology is unclear, and any method could not be understood outside of its political context. For our purposes, I am concerned with methodology, which I understand as philosophical knowledge about how knowledge is produced – including an
in 1996. In the opening to his methodological book, *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science*, he writes:

> Throughout much of its history, the basic question in the philosophy of social science has been: is social science scientific, or can it be? Social scientists have historically sought to claim the mantle of science and have modelled their studies on the natural sciences. Consequently, the philosophy of social science has traditionally consisted in assessments of social science’s success in this regard, of the ways social science is like and unlike natural science.²

Similarly, Hubert Dreyfus writes, “There is, indeed, something wrong with our culture’s worship of natural science, as if what science tells us about the fundamental particles has fundamental importance for all aspects of life.”³

In qualitative social science, one side-effect of this scientism has been an attempt to replicate the sciences way by making use of our own jargon in order to sound scientific. The result has been methodological inflation, what Charles Taylor describes as an “epistemological bias” or an “obsession” that follows from “the progress of natural science….”⁴ An example of the kind of methodological inflation is when social scientists turn to philosophy for methodological terminology to describe something that is (1) not necessarily methodological and (2) involves repurposing philosophical terms that denote particular philosophical problems or methodologies for non-philosophical meanings.

For example, ontology becomes short-hand for any-thing. In International Relations this turn has been heavily shaped by the critical or scientific realists, who argue that “we should look at what entities we can find and identify in the international sphere…”⁵ This framing of ontology appreciation of the socio-political dynamics of knowledge production – and which shapes the decisions we make about what we do in the production of knowledge.

is fairly shallow insofar as its main point is to identify units or entities (or perhaps substances) of interest. Put simply, that is not fundamental ontology in any Heideggerian sense, and the narrow way in which ontology is understood (and used) in this literature is suggested at by Patrick Jackson. Phenomenology, similarly, becomes short-hand for any research concerned with people’s experiences of something. To be sure, it makes sense for the philosophy of phenomenology to ground such empirical work, but empirical social science and philosophy have different definitions of phenomenology, even if the former relies on the latter. It has become common to throw around philosophical language in order to provide gravitas to qualitative research as though we need to compete with scientists and their scientific jargon. I want to reject this assumption for the simple reason that political theory and by implication normative political research, should be understood on its own terms.

Indeed, Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*, suggests that the natural sciences and philosophy exist in different worlds; both do their own thing, but they do not answer each other’s questions and should not drive each other’s methodologies. As he writes,

In suggesting that anthropology, psychology, and biology all fail to give an unequivocal and ontologically adequate answer to the question about the *kind of being* which belongs to those entities which we ourselves are, we are not passing judgement on the positive work of these disciplines. We must always bear in mind, however, that these ontological foundations can never be disclosed by subsequent hypotheses derived from empirical material, but that they are always ‘there’ already, even when that empirical material simply gets collected.

Debates about philosophy, science and methodology are clearly not new, and are rarely conclusive. Famously, Paul Feyerabend went so far to argue that there is no single methodology that defines science. Moreover, Heidegger’s views about science changed by the time he wrote his essay about technology, at which point he calls into question his previous views about there

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8 *Being and Time*, 75 (50).
being space for both scientific and philosophical methodologies.\textsuperscript{10} In the Social Sciences, debates about what methodology provides the grounding for social knowledge are not new, and can be traced back to Hume, Weber, Parsons, and many others. In Political Science the key debate about methodology in political theory or political philosophy\textsuperscript{11} pertains to a set of methodological positions that started to gain prominence in the 1950s and 1960s. It is worth revisiting this debate between the behaviouralists and political theorists because, controversially, it is possible to find some points of similarity, not between the political theorists and the behaviouralists, but among the political theorists. These similarities are interesting because although they do not suggest a unified methodology or unitary direction of purpose within political theory, they do suggest that there are some very general methodological positions that cut across political theory, some of which are consistent with hermeneutic phenomenology. It may be that doing hermeneutic phenomenology in political theory is more familiar and less complicated than reading \textit{Being and Time} would suggest.

Consequently, in the following I will, first, review the debate between the behaviouralists and political theorists in order to highlight a few similarities across different traditions of political theory. As political theory sought to fight back and defend its place in Political Science, guiding statements were crafted that remain insightful about what political theory is and how it is done. In making their case for political theory, certain similarities emerged. These similarities provide a shared point of reference so that what might seem to be a controversial move toward hermeneutic phenomenology can actually be read as one reasonable answer that follows from a set of shared general assumptions.

The tendency to dismiss hermeneutic phenomenology can be found in the extent to which such a methodology is inherently relativist because it is fundamentally based only on interpretation, without foundational moral principles to serve as a framework for normative analysis. In his discussion on this issue, Hubert Dreyfus quotes Evelyn Fox who highlighted just how serious the stakes of this debate are: “[If] truth is relative, if science is divorced from nature and married instead to culture then the privileged status of that authority is fundamentally undermined.”\textsuperscript{12} The extent by which this culture or science war spread across the academy was

\textsuperscript{11} I will be using political theory and political philosophy interchangeably in this essay.
\textsuperscript{12} Quoted in, Dreyfus, "Being-in-the-World," 252.
evident in the infamous Sokal hoax, when Alan Sokal, a physicist, published a hoax article in *Social Text* and has gone on to argue at great length about the political dangers of conducting any social research on non-naturalist-grounded methods.13 This debate is, however, problematic if taken at face value for two reasons. First, it assumes a hegemony of methods, and thus seeks to assess all knowledge production according to a single standard with no room for alternatives. Two, as Dreyfus notes, it misses the key insight that is of significance and which is that, “it would be sufficient to demonstrate that although natural science can tell us the truth about the causal powers of nature, it does not have a special access to ultimate reality. This is exactly what Heidegger attempts to show.”14 For our purposes, what matters is that the science of interpretation can be addressed methodologically on its own terms. The question at issue, consequently, is what these terms are. It is in this regard that the shared points of similarity across political theory are significant. They point out a frame of reference in which to appreciate and evaluate our own methodology.

Part of the argument I will advance here is that there is a lot in hermeneutic phenomenology that should be appear fairly familiar. In academic writing the tendency is to highlight what is wrong and where there is disagreement. I am going to pursue a different track by searching out what we share. The points of similarity are useful because although they clearly mask a lot of important differences (some of which I will highlight) they also reveal in straightforward language a possible framework by which hermeneutic phenomenology can function as a methodology for political theory. Central to the discussion about methodology and political theory will be the works of David Truman (who was central to Robert Dahl’s understanding of behaviouralism) David Easton, Max Horkheimer, Sheldon Wolin and Charles Taylor. My discussion about hermeneutic phenomenology will be based around Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. The argument advanced here, however, is not intended to be an interpretation of Heidegger. Rather the argument will be that it is possible to conduct political theory that is normative and which uses methodological tools found in hermeneutic phenomenology. In this vein, the central methodological positions that need to be explored involve how we understand interpretation as a normative activity, and of the means by which interpretation involves values.

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and is neither relativist nor nihilist. The answers to these questions will hinge largely on the centrality of the hermeneutic circle.

**Part 1: What is Political Theory and What is Political Theory For?**

Williams Blattner notes that philosophy has a history of trying to define itself in distinction to other sciences. He writes,

> The idea of philosophy as a separate discipline, distinct from physics, theology, and psychology for example, is a relatively new innovation. The writings of the major philosophers from the time of ancient Greece up until the nineteenth century covered a range of topics that would not be considered philosophical today. Indeed, natural science was called “natural philosophy” until the end of the eighteenth century.¹⁵

There is a tradition of philosophy having to define itself in contrast to other “sciences.” However, by the 20th Century, as methodological issues became increasingly important, this tradition took on an exceedingly extremist form with the rise of an almost ideological methodism (more on this below). The methodological debate between the behaviouralists and political theorists has its roots in the middle of the 20th Century. Yet, even with the passage of time, contemporary questions about methodology and political theory are still shaped by this debate for the simple reason that the naturalist scientific model of research remains the gold standard in the hierarchy of evidence, and thus is presumably what political theory needs to contrast its methodological opportunities against. Arguing against the behaviouralists required that political theorists defined their own methodological terrain. It is, consequently, worth returning to that debate.

One of the classic works that set out the promise of the empiricist methodological approach to political science is Robert Dahl’s article, *The Behavioural Approach in Political Science*, published in 1961. As he argues, the behaviouralist approach was a “protest movement”

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against the humanities-style of methodologies used in politics research. This protest was so successful that he saw it as becoming conventional within Political Science, which while not rejecting historical knowledge, methodologically was increasingly grounded on empirically based science. Dahl's definition was influenced by a short essay published a decade earlier, in 1951, by David Truman, a year that saw two important methodological articles.

The same year that David Truman published his seminal work on behaviouralism, The Implications of Political Behaviour Research, David Easton published The Decline of Political Theory. The contrast between these two texts clearly outlines a problem that remains important when determining what we understand methodology to mean. More extensive political theory critiques of the behaviouralist turn are provided by Wolin and Taylor, who I will return to later, but the publication of these two texts in 1951 provides a shared moment in time in which to begin.

Truman’s argument is nuanced in an important way. His argument is not a precursor to the kind of “Freakonomics” approach to social research where it is not the subject that is important but the method. Truman is clear, “The essential training” he writes, “must be in terms of significant problems in political behaviour, not techniques in general or theory unrelated to empirically researchable questions.” His argument is equally clear in its methodological focus:

...Research must be systematic if it is to identify the patterns of relationships which work through, or in spite of, the formalities of government to define the operating political system. This means that research must grow out of a precise statement of hypotheses and a rigorous ordering of evidence which will permit: (1) the identification of behavioural uniformities and of the conditions under which they

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18 Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything, Rev. and expanded ed. ed. (New York: William Morrow & Co., 2006). Of side interest, I would suggest that this kind of methodological approach contributed to the intellectual foundations that enabled the sub-prime mortgage crisis to occur, as statisticians were tasked with creating financial products — it was the method that mattered and not so much what was being done with these methods or the normative consequences therein.

are to be expected; (2) the validation of findings through successive research; and (3) the accretion of knowledge reflected in concepts of increasing power and generality.

In the second place, research in political behaviour must place primary emphasis upon empirical methods.\(^{20}\)

This statement is largely a social scientific adoption of the basic elements underlying a naturalist scientific method: empirical observation, generalizable conclusions, a process to test the conclusions, and improved knowledge being that which has greater explanatory power.\(^{21}\)

Contrast this view to Easton’s four-part distinction of what comprises traditional political theory (and which is based on Locke). Easton does not dismiss the significance of empirical knowledge and allows for causal theory. Political theory involves four different types of propositions. Easton writes:

> We can conveniently identify this variety of propositions by calling the descriptive statements, factual statements; the assumed relations between facts, pure or causal theory; the inter-related statements of preferences, value theory; and the propositions designed to apply facts and implicit causal theory to the fulfilment of given ends, applied principles.\(^{22}\)

Any similarity with the empirical based research program advanced by Truman and Dahl is, however, incidental, because Easton is specifically targeting the historical approach to political theory that seeks “to concentrate on the relation of values to the milieu in which they appear rather than on the task of attempting to create new conceptions of values commensurate with men’s needs.”\(^{23}\) Not mincing his words, “As it is has been practiced by that majority, the historical approach has managed to crush the life out of the value theory.”\(^{24}\) Easton goes on to argue that

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\(^{20}\) Ibid., 38.


\(^{23}\) Ibid., 40.

\(^{24}\) Ibid.
insofar as values are important to the work of political theorists, the “task of defining the situation in value terms must be considered an art rather than a science.”\(^{25}\) Values, he argues, are “personal responses fixed by our life-experiences.”\(^{26}\) He continues to argue that values are important in framing much empirical political research, but instead of focusing on the art of value-creation, empirical researchers circle around this art.

There are a few key points of contrast here. In the empiricist camp, research is about problem-solving, it is historically informed, but it is restricted to either a description or explanation of related phenomena in its ability to create knowledge, and it is focused on empirical research that can be subject to scientific standards (Truman mentions verification, but we could substitute falsifiability and still end up with the same general idea — Easton mentions both). Easton, on the other hand, focuses on the production of values, i.e. normative theory, that is produced via a different methodological position akin to “art” but which is mildly reflexive, certainly reflective, makes use of empirical evidence and also assumes a variety of causal relations by which normative positions can be applied to a specific end. In more ways than one this contrast is remarkably similar to that between traditional and Critical Theory, as explained by Horkheimer in the 1930s.\(^{27}\)

Easton is no Critical Theorist. Nevertheless, this similarity is interesting precisely because the Lockean basis of Easton’s analysis is inconsistent with both the content and the aims of Critical Theory. Easton’s conclusions are not the same as those of Horkheimer. Easton wants political theory to serve as a kind of foundational sub-field in political science by “attempting the… massive task of elaborating a usable conceptual framework for the whole body of political science.”\(^{28}\) He wants political theory to assimilate into the “main current of empirical research in political science, and thereby revive itself after the unrewarding historical study to which it has been devoted in the last fifty years.”\(^{29}\) Horkheimer is, of course, more radical in wanting Critical Theory to serve a revolutionary purpose in highlighting and then overcoming the conditions of oppression in a capitalist society. Moreover, Horkheimer is not so sanguine about the verification or falsifiability test for theory as Easton is, arguing instead that, “There are no general criteria for

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 49.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 47.


\(^{28}\) Easton, "The Decline of Modern Political Theory," 58.

\(^{29}\) Ibid.
judging the critical theory as a whole, for it is always based on the recurrence of events and thus on a self-reproducing totality."\textsuperscript{30} Nevertheless, there are some underlying similarities that remain relevant when thinking about how to conduct political theory.

The focus on values and on normative theory, as well as some of the means by which normative theory is conducted are noteworthy, albeit general, points of similarity: using empirical claims and assuming the existence of empirical causal relations, applying values in their analysis in order to then advance a normative argument, are largely all consistent across both arguments. Of course, the actual content of how they understand empirical knowledge (and thus their ontological framing of the thinking subject) are dramatically different. Yet, it is worth reflecting for a moment that as political theorists, there are general methodological points we share that enable the field to function, even if most of the time we focus on the differences, but even then the contestation reveals an important shared methodological concern across the field.

One of these shared points of contestation is ontological. In this vein, Horkheimer’s attack against positivism and traditional theory was tied to his suspicions about objective and ostensibly neutral social knowledge. His hostility to this kind of theorising is expressed in various ways, one of which relates to the values and identity of the thinking subject. He notes how the “subject is… a definite individual in [a] real relation to other individuals and groups, in… conflict with a particular class, and, finally, in the resultant web of relationships with the social totality and with nature.”\textsuperscript{31} In short, we can never escape our socio-political and economic conditions: they matter. Horkheimer is also advancing an ontological argument here, one which is a significant challenge of the traditional thinking subject. He writes:

The subject is not mathematical point like the ego of bourgeois philosophy; his activity is the construction of the social present. Furthermore, the thinking subject is not the place where knowledge and object coincide, nor consequently the starting-point for the attaining absolute knowledge. Such an illusion about the thinking subject, under which idealism has lived since Descartes, is ideology in the strict sense, for in it the limited freedom of the bourgeois individual puts on the illusory form of perfect freedom and autonomy.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 211.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
If we leave aside the admittedly important Freudian commentary and the idea of a bourgeois philosophy, there is a similarity to some of the underlying methodological points that we will discover feature strongly in Heidegger, insofar as both critique the traditional Cartesian subject/object distinction.

For now, however, the point I want to emphasise is how values and context are so clearly central to the idea of Critical Theory. Intriguingly both Easton and Horkheimer recognise the importance of context, either (for Easton) in the ability to develop value-propositions or (for Horkheimer) in understanding the current conditions that Critical Theory questions and reveals. Both are necessarily engaged in making ontological claims either about the role of context and of the empirical world of study, and of the identity of the subject. Just because both have dramatically differing ontological worldviews does not mitigate the fact that they recognize its methodological importance. Moreover, both Easton and Horkheimer acknowledge the significance of either reflection or reflexivity. This is another important shared point of contestation, one whose significance seems to be have been missed by Easton. He is not entirely clear what he means by values involving “personal responses fixed by our life-experiences.” At first glance this could be a re-articulation of Max Weber’s argument about the importance of appreciating the identity of the scholar.33 However, this is unlikely as Easton clearly has a different agenda in mind than Weber did (significant for our purposes here Easton was also critical of the hermeneutic move rooted in the work of Dilthey because of its historicism).34 Instead, the point raised by Easton about personal responses is evidence of Locke’s influence on his work, but it also speaks to a more general and very important question about the detached critic, and what personal experience actually means for the conduct of political theory and of interpretation.

Michael Walzer addresses this issue in his short book on social criticism.35 In this text, Walzer provides a methodological argument for the conduct of normative political theory. His key

point of immediate relevance is to question the idea of the detached critic. Walzer takes aim at the traditional position in much analytic political theory that normative judgements and moral arguments are best developed from a set of abstract and preferably universal principles. Instead, argues Walzer, the social critic, i.e. the political theorist or moral philosopher, needs to be invested in the issue at hand. Easton seems to be raising this same question: that the identity of the theorist is somehow important in being able to develop a position from which to advance value-laden judgements. Yet, whereas Easton seeks, in the words of Michael Gibbons, “greater scientific purchase of political theory,” Walzer’s argument is influenced by Gramsci and post-Marxist thought. There is an important difference here that also represents a shared point of concern within political theory.

Easton’s recognition of the context the political theorist is restricted to the positionality of the scholar, in the sense that personal knowledge of living at a particular time and place provides the empirical grounding for the theorist’s worldview. He writes, “Locke makes observations of political facts that rest on his knowledge of history and of his own time, and, therefore, we do not need to dwell on the factual statements.” Walzer is making a different point. This kind of positionality remains important, but for a different reason. Walzer is responding to the argument that too much positionality renders the theorist inherently conservative, insofar as the critic will not be able to step outside of the normative framework in which they reside and thus cannot offer a truly transformative moral argument. For Walzer, like Gramsci and the post-Marxist Critical Theorists, the idea of the detached moral critic is unintelligible. Not only is not possible to be detached in this way, it is unfathomable as it removes one’s own investment in the normative project.

Moreover, one could argue that the detached moral critics are rarely as detached as one might think. Barry Schwartz provides such an argument in his book, The Battle for Human Nature, where he points out how seemingly revolutionary ideas about the human condition that have been so transformative in history, such as Darwin’s biological theory and subsequent re-interpretation via Spencer into social Darwinism, are influenced by assumptions about society, identity and values that were products of their time. The point I want to take away from this discussion is that identity and positionality, the contexts or worlds in which the theorist resides are important.

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How they matter is debated, as is which identity and which context is deemed most important (age, gender, class, profession, parent, child, citizen, resident of which country, religion, etc.), but that they matter are clear.

**Part 2: We are not natural scientists and the importance of hermeneutics**

Any discussion of methodology and political theory needs to be cautious not to fall into the trap of trying to defend political theory as though the point of contrast is natural science. In 1969, also in response to the behaviouralist revolution, Sheldon Wolin noted that “American political scientists, for the most part, have not only generally supported the traditional American diffidence toward theories, but they have elevated it to scientific status.” The turn away from theory (or for that matter philosophical reflection on the conduct of social science) toward method, what he refers to as methodism, remains powerful in the Social Sciences, as evident in the classic methods textbook, *Designing Social Inquiry*. Recent monographs in IR on causality provide a useful counter to this kind of methodism, and the related work of Hidemi Suganami has been an important reminder not to forget the role of philosophical reflection for methodology (his primary interest is causation). Nevertheless, Wolin’s point remains important in no small part because it is crucial for any methodological discussion within political theory (or political philosophy) to function in terms of their own research programs.

Wolin’s critique is additionally insightful because of how methodism dismisses what he terms “tacit political knowledge.” Tacit political knowledge is learned over time but “never by means of a specified program in which particular subjects are chosen in order to produce specific

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43 He borrows this term from Polanyi. Wolin, "Political Theory as Vocation," 1968.
results”, it is “rooted in knowledge of the past and of the tradition of theory.” The kind of knowledge Wolin has in mind is that type which is best understood as daily know-how and is not something that relies on the application of a set of fixed skills in order to resolve a clearly specified problem. This is a type of knowledge that political theory rarely takes seriously, although it should because if political theory is supposed to address the normative conditions of political life, i.e. a human life, it needs to engage with how people understand the conditions that they find themselves in. Here we find yet another instance in which certain types of empirical and practical knowledge are important.

In this vein, Charles Taylor provides a methodological explanation of this kind of knowledge, which he classifies as falling under the science of interpretation, or hermeneutics. The defining criteria of this science is interpretation: “the criteria of judgement in a hermeneutical science” come down to “successful interpretation.” Of course, this sounds rather circular, and it begs the question of what counts as successful interpretation. Taylor is not as clear as one would like on this point. His answer, which is decidedly Heideggerian, is that it unveils somethings that is otherwise hidden. But this answer provides no moral standpoint from which to judge which interpretation is normatively better. However, this absence is only a problem if we require a moral standpoint or some suitably objective set of moral principles, and if we require this then the interpretation is not consistent with hermeneutic phenomenology.

The methodology of hermeneutics,

...Would not be founded on brute data; its most primitive data would be readings of meanings, and its object would have three properties: the meanings are for a subject in a field or fields; they are moreover meanings which are partially constituted by self-definitions, which are in this sense already interpretations, and which can thus be re-expressed or made explicit by a science of politics. In our case, the subject may be a society or community; but the intersubjective meanings... embody a certain self-definition, a vision of the agent and his [her] society, which is that of the society or community.

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44 Ibid., 1969.
45 Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," 5.
46 Ibid., 45.
The hermeneutic circle, which has come to play an important part in social theory is explained by Taylor as the unavoidability of an “ultimate appeal to a common understanding of the expressions, of the 'language' involved.” The general idea is that in order to help someone else understand our own position, we can only do so in terms that they themselves understand. Providing his own account of the hermeneutic circle, Anthony Giddens writes, “All understanding demands some measure of pre-understanding whereby further understanding is possible.”

Giddens’ definition of the hermeneutic circle is from Heidegger via Gadamer.

The hermeneutic circle seems to me to be a fairly conventional experience that we all share, although it is not a method insofar as it is a “the ontological process of human discourse in operation, in which, through the mediation of language, 'life mediates life.'” As Michael Gibbons writes, “According to the Gadamer-Taylor position, our appropriation of the world, at both the intellectual and practical levels, always takes place within a linguistic-historical tradition from which we cannot fully extricate ourselves.” Indeed, it is only possible to explain an argument when all the interlocutors are able to understand the language in which that argument is conducted.

If we reject the need for a fixed moral point for critique, and instead accept the inevitably of the hermeneutic circle, even for moral criticism and political theory, is there something that stands in its place? The answer is no, sort of. There is not so much a replacement as a different way of thinking about our place in the world. It is useful here to recall that for Heidegger, the hermeneutic circle is by itself not a problem, provided that we enter it the right way. The same could be argued about normative interpretation. The absence of a fixed normative principle is not a problem provided that we enter into the interpretation – into the hermeneutic circle – the right way. And this entry point involves a very important ontological move. Whereas the detached critics ostensibly design their arguments by way of fixed moral standards, this approach only works if

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48 Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," 6.
50 Ibid.
52 This bears a similarity to Thomas Kuhn’s idea of a paradigm. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed., ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Dreyfus, in his discussion of Heidegger, draws multiple parallels between some of the claims made by Heidegger in *Being and Time* to Kuhn’s argument about paradigms and science. See, Dreyfus, "Being-in-the-World."
we also accept a separation of subjects and between subject/object. The separation is needed in this case because without it there can be no moral position that is independent of the subject. This approach is what Heidegger argues is wrong in the history of Western philosophy because it treats the human condition as just another type of being like any other entity or substance, when it patently cannot be. Taylor's move is to highlight the alternative ontological stance of intersubjectivity.

Intersubjectivity is the ontological basis for methodologically assessing political theory on its own terms. In explaining intersubjectivity, Taylor writes:

But what we are dealing with here is not subjective meaning, but rather intersubjective meanings. It is not just that the people in our society all or mostly have a given set of ideas in their heads and subscribe to a given set of goals. The meanings and norms implicit in these practices are not just in the minds of the actors but are out there in the practices themselves, practices which cannot be conceived as a set of individual actions, but which are essentially modes of social relations, of mutual action.53

If we think of how people behave, it is rare to find anybody who acts in a manner consistent with an unchanging moral code. If that was the case, we would not need to come up with such terms as cognitive dissonance. People rarely act consistently, and those who do would most likely appear to be kind of odd. Rather, humans are creatures of their world, they are creatures of habit, of context, and while there may be patterns of behaviour, such patterns do not mean we operate according to a determined set of principles all the time. Again, Barry Schwartz's book about human nature provides a compelling and straightforward critique against a universal ontological view of the human condition, arguing that some of the objective views we hold about human nature, such as rationality, are often self-fulfilling and thus cannot be treated as objectively and independently universal truths.54 The absence of a moral foundation does not, however, negate that people do operate according to normative beliefs, and the absence of a universal law for conduct does not mean that we are all nihilists or relativists.55 We are, instead, intersubjective beings, based in and shaped by our worlds of human interaction.

53 Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," 27.
55 I would like to thank Jonathan Havercroft for his helpful discussions on these points.
In summary, there are, then, five key methodological points that have been raised so far. These include: (1) the importance of the identity, including location (geographical, professional, cultural), of the scholar; (2) the world in the sense of something making sense within a particular context; (3) a wider context of intersubjectivity; (4) a type of knowledge that is not formally learned, and (5) the significance of the hermeneutic circle. All of these bear a very close resemblance to select methodological positions advanced by Martin Heidegger.

Part 3: Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Political Theory

On one level, this similarity should not surprise us. Heidegger’s influence is evident in the works of both Charles Taylor and Sheldon Wolin. More generally, Heidegger’s influence is hard to under-estimate, cutting across Sociology (Anthony Giddens), Anthropology (Clifford Geertz), and Cultural Studies (Frederik Jameson). In the continental tradition, Heidegger is especially important for the work of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Jurgen Habermas, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and in the case of Emmanuel Levinas, we find an approach to philosophy directly opposed to Heidegger. William Blattner writes that, “Being and Time was published in 1927 and rapidly became one of the most significant and controversial philosophical texts of the twentieth century.”\(^5^6\) Charles B. Guignon similarly writes how, “As the twenty-first century begins, it is increasingly clear that Heidegger will stand out as one of the greatest philosophers of all times. His writings have had an immense impact not only in Europe and the English-speaking world but in Asia as well.”\(^5^7\) Intriguingly due to his mention of management consultants, Hubert Dreyfus notes how, “At an international conference in Berkeley commemorating the hundredth anniversary of Heidegger’s birth, not only philosophers but also doctors, nurses, psychotherapist, theologians, management consultants, educators, lawyers, and computer scientists took part in a discussion of the way Heidegger’s thought had affected their work.”\(^5^8\) It is not sensible to imagine contemporary philosophy without the influence of Heidegger.

Heidegger offers his own definition of phenomenology, unsurprisingly since much of Being and Time is a dramatic critique of Western philosophy and involves him providing new definitions.

\(^5^6\) Blattner, *Heidegger’s Being and Time*, 1.
for multiple terms. Phenomenology is not about explaining people’s experiences of the world, it is about uncovering the structures through which we experience and inhabit the world. “The expression ‘phenomenology’ signifies primarily a methodological conception. This expression does not characterize the what of the objects of philosophical research as subject-matter, but rather the how of that research.” For Heidegger, what phenomenology does is provide a methodology for being able to uncover not just things themselves, but phenomenon that are hidden yet are fundamental to our being:

Manifestly, [phenomenon] is something that that proximally and for the most part does not show itself at all: it is something that lies hidden, in contrast to that which proximal and for the most part does show itself; but at the same time it is something that belongs to what thus shows itself, and it belongs to it so essentially as to constitute its meaning and its ground.

Phenomenology is thus concerned with ontology. However, as explained in an introductory overview of Being and Time, “Traditional ontology… has misconstrued our being as human beings by assuming that we share the same mode of being as other entities we encounter within the world, such as tables, rocks, dogs, atoms, or numbers.” Why this matters is because, as Dreyfus writes, “In Heidegger’s hands, phenomenology becomes a way of letting something shared that can never be totally articulated and for which there can be no indubitable evidence show itself.” In short, the ontology of humans is fundamentally different from that of other things. Humans are not a substance with minds, and there can be no external category of being human in which this being is independent of the world in which it exists. For Heidegger, we share in the world and are always a part of that world. However, central to our being-in-the-world is hiddenness. “The subject of phenomenology,” Dreyfus writes, “must be something that does not show itself but can be made to show itself.”

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59 Heidegger, Being and Time, 50 (27) emphasis in original. See also page 59 (35).
60 Ibid., 59 (35).
63 Ibid., 32.
The main, indeed, the essential and necessary example of this something is being, *Dasein*, the “*Being* of entities” which, “…is something that belongs to what thus shows itself, and it belongs to it so essentially as to constitute its meaning and its ground.”\(^{64}\) Consequently, “phenomenology is the science of the being of entities — ontology.”\(^ {65}\) This science is interpretive and, consequently, is hermeneutical. The reason is because at issue is not the existence of being, but rather the meaning of being: “The phenomenology of *Dasein* is a *hermeneutic*….”\(^ {66}\) As Dreyfus writes, “For *Heidegger*, *hermeneutics* begins at home in an interpretation of the structure of everydayness in which *Dasein* dwells.”\(^ {67}\) These structures are represented in the various for-the-sake-of-which, in-order-to, and towards-which that characterise our being-in-the-world. Said differently, *Heidegger*’s hermeneutic phenomenology is about revealing the daily structures of the world that we inevitably and necessarily engage with, but rarely think about. What concerns phenomenology is the “on the basis of which entities are already understood.”\(^ {68}\)

There is, consequently, an unavoidable circularity to this kind of analysis that Dreyfus describes as a “*hermeneutics of everydayness*.”\(^ {69}\) This circularity follows the inevitability of the hermeneutic circle, but *Heidegger* provides a more fundamental definition of this circle than the one we have already defined. As explained, with Taylor the circle is about how any interpretation in turn relies on its ability to be communicated and for this communication there needs to exist a shared language. Anthony Giddens similarly describes the circle as the interpretation of interpretations. *Heidegger*, however, makes a more fundamental claim by arguing that we can only interpret that which we are already a part of. What this ultimately means is that there is a potentially never-ending series of contexts in which any interpretation can take place: identity, geography, gender, age, profession, task, etc. Moreover, this kind of phenomenology assigns great significance to the every-day knowledge of coping or of managing/being able to get-by in the world. This is the kind of practical knowledge that is rarely taught, but which we need to have. One of the examples that Dreyfus uses of this type of knowledge is of the spatial distances of proximity that people are comfortable within when speaking with someone else.\(^ {70}\) It is not as if we are taught to stand a particular distance from another person, we just pick it up — or at least,

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\(^{64}\) *Heidegger*, *Being and Time*, 59 (35).

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 61 (37).

\(^{66}\) Ibid., 62 (37).

\(^{67}\) Dreyfus, "Being-in-the-World," 34.

\(^{68}\) *Heidegger*, *Being and Time*, 25-26 (6); see also page 119 (86).

\(^{69}\) Dreyfus, "Being-in-the-World," 34.

\(^{70}\) Ibid., 18-19.
most of us do — and these distances can vary between cultures. There are, consequently, contexts within contexts, and a type of knowledge that is not formally learned.

It is tempting to see this circularity of never-ending contexts as inherently inconclusive if not relativist to the point of meaningless. However, as Blattner points out:

Circularity is not necessarily a problem, because ontology proceeds hermeneutically and hermeneutics is essentially circular in method. … Just as in reading a book we move back and forth between an understanding of the part of the book we are reading and our understanding of the whole book, so in doing ontology we move back and forth between articulating some specific mode of being and our vision of the whole field of being.\(^\text{71}\)

Heidegger is not concerned about the circularity, but rather that we approach it correctly: “What is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come at it in the right way. This circle of understanding is not an orbit in which any random kind of knowledge may move; it is the expression of the existential \textit{fore-structure} of Dasein itself.”\(^\text{72}\)

Accepting the circle is important because it is part of what differentiates this methodology from any methodology where there has to be clear entry and exit points that determine what is being studied from the contexts in which it is being studied, or which provide a stationary reference point. Hence Heidegger’s insistence that, “Any interpretation which is to contribute understanding, must already have understood what is to be interpreted.”\(^\text{73}\) It is in this discussion that Heidegger gives the natural sciences its own place, and acknowledges its contributions to knowledge. This does not mean that the natural sciences are “more rigorous”\(^\text{74}\) but instead that the science of interpretation is inherently of a different type. In short, they have their own methodologies, their own questions and the methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology is fundamentally of a different order.\(^\text{75}\) This difference is, in part, defined by the hermeneutic circle.

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\(^{71}\) Blattner, \textit{Heidegger's Being and Time}, 22.

\(^{72}\) Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 195 (53).

\(^{73}\) Ibid., 194 (52).

\(^{74}\) Ibid., 195 (53).

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 194-95 (52-53).
The hermeneutic circle, however, can be difficult to grasp in normative terms considering Heidegger’s own politics. The potential relativism if not outright ugliness of his own political choices makes it inherently difficult to take his methodology and claim it has normative potential in a good way. This rejection of Heidegger can be quite persuasive when we take into account Heidegger’s Nazi past. In this regard Habermas’ concern with Heidegger is with the potential absence of any moral perspective within his ontology, arguing that such absence is fatal. That fatality is because Heidegger’s own politics suggest a moral vacuum that was ostensibly consistent with Heidegger’s philosophy. In this regard, there have been attempts to isolate Heidegger’s own politics from his philosophy. Yet, this is admittedly hard to do when Heidegger provides evidence of his own inhumanity.

In 1949, he wrote how, “Agriculture is now a mechanised food industry. As for its essence, it is the same thing as the manufacture of corpses in the gas chambers and the death camps, the same thing as the blockades and reduction of countries to famine, the same thing as the manufacture of hydrogen bombs.” Responding to this statement of Heidegger’s, Steven B. Smith remarks,

Heidegger’s efforts to define the essence of technology led to an almost inhuman indifference to the uses to which technology is put. To say that the production of food to feed the starving is “the same thing” as the production of Zyklon B for Auschwitz is to exhibit neither naiveté nor cynicism, but grows logically out of Heidegger’s understanding of the Holocaust as a purely technical problem. Heidegger was never at a loss to complain about the despoilation of the forests and rivers of his beloved Schwarzwald, but could not find so much as a word of regret for the true victims of National Socialism.

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77 Smith, "Heidegger and Political Philosophy," 457.

78 Ibid., 457-58.
Heidegger’s influence on philosophy combined with his political decisions have made him a controversial figure, one who has been accused of bringing National Socialism into philosophy.\textsuperscript{79} Even philosophers heavily engaged with Heidegger — indeed, indebted to — like Hubert Dreyfus are damming critics of his political thought. Instead of a potential relativism or nihilism, Dreyfus argues that the danger in Heidegger is fundamentally different: “Heidegger’s \textit{philosophy}... is dangerous because it seeks to convince us that only a god — a charismatic figure or some other culturally renewing event — can save us from falling into contented nihilism. It exposes us to the risk of committing ourselves to some demonic event or movement that promises renewal.”\textsuperscript{80} However, Dreyfus makes the important point that even within Heidegger we find the warning that “any guidelines must always be interpreted...”\textsuperscript{81} This is an important point because although it does not excuse Heidegger, it does provide the crucial point in defence of Heidegger’s methodology of interpretation. There is always another interpretation.

The idea that only a fixed moral argument can provide normative guidance is just as problematic as Heidegger’s philosophy may be to politics. The connection between Enlightenment rationality and the Holocaust should, if nothing else, give us pause before we decide to celebrate the Enlightenment ideal of rationality as underlying morality.\textsuperscript{82} Universal rational moral principles can be useful to moral philosophers, and of course they can inform our legal systems, but they are rarely practically applied in our daily lives. They imagine a world in which our interpretations about normative issues can be framed in the certainty of principles. Even our legal discourses are subject to interpretation, so for example, in international law deliberation is required in order to decide if a military response is proportionate or discriminate. The idea that a moral rule can provide the solution to Heidegger is easily questioned when, in the case of Eichmann, we have a human being of clear intelligence who understood Kant’s categorical imperative (in a general way)

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 371.
and yet still see nothing wrong with his actions.\textsuperscript{83} This situation is not so much about cognitive dissonance, it is that people can and do interpret rules, norms and situations in a variety of ways. In other words, Heidegger may not provide us with a moral or political philosophy,\textsuperscript{84} but he does provide an ontological argument that is clearly relevant to people’s experiences of being, and in this regard his hermeneutic phenomenology is relevant to politics.

In response, it could be argued that if Heidegger’s politics could be so odious, and if the only methodological tool he provides is an endless interpretive circle, then his philosophy is potentially nihilistic. As such, even if his philosophy is revealing in a helpful way, it still cannot offer any normative application. Dreyfus argues against this view, claiming that even Heidegger argues that, “a mysterious source of meaning… creates and sustains us.”\textsuperscript{85} This kind of post-Nietzschean thought is not nihilist. Moreover, even if we claim that only with a clear foundational moral rule can be we be sure of avoiding the dangers that Heidegger himself succumbed to by his Nazism, can we escape the potential dangers of nihilism or relativism, such an argument ignores that Enlightenment morality has not been without its own dangers that seem relativist. For example, Locke’s political thought was fundamental to the worldview that led to the genocide of First Nations in North America, thus placing two different value systems in conflict. The internal logic of the way in which the First Nations were treated overcame any relativist doubt by way of technology and a legal discourse of sovereignty that forced the indigenous population to play by the rules of a game that they could not win.\textsuperscript{86} Even Kant was not absolved of un-ethical racist views,\textsuperscript{87} contrary to what one might think from his categorical imperative. The idea that we have


\textsuperscript{84} Or rather, with a political philosophy that can be separated from his Nazism. Two works that do, however, find political philosophy within Heidegger include, James F. Ward, \textit{Heidegger's Political Thinking} (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995); Frederick A. Olafson, \textit{Heidegger and the Ground of Ethics: A Study of Mitsein} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).


a choice between a rule-bound moral code or relativism is a false dichotomy and, if we are to learn anything from Heidegger, fails to grasp how people live their lives or how humans conduct their politics.

Humans regularly contest unjust rules and vary their moral behaviour in different circumstances. Sometimes we get it right, sometimes not. But the errors cannot be attributed to moral relativism. One of Heidegger’s most famous students, Hannah Arendt, was on to something very important when she wrote how the only convincing argument against murder is that “I would not want to live in the presence of a murderer.” It is how we live with our moral acts that matters just as much as anything else, if not more so.

The point here is that Heidegger does not provide us with a moral philosophy. However, that does not mean his interpretative methodology is irrelevant to political theory. Indeed, if anything, his ontological argument with its emphasis on hermeneutics is especially important for politics because we are always self-interpreting beings. Our condition is interpretive, and since we cannot escape from this condition, it seems perfectly sensible to embrace it in how we think about politics. This approach is different from trying to rehabilitate Heidegger, or claiming that he offers a political theory, which is largely what Frederick Olafson claims in his book *Heidegger and the Ground of Ethics*.

Olafson’s argument is that according to Heidegger, part of the being-in-the-world is being together with other people, what Heidegger calls *Mitsein.* Olafson goes on to note that, “It is not just an empirical fact, [Heidegger] argues, that there are many other human beings in the world. Our being with other like entities is, instead, a constitutive element in our own mode of being as it is in theirs…..” Olafson then develops this account of being-with as a grounds for ethics. Yet, this discussion largely requires that we bring into *Being and Time* a normative argument that is not there. It may be true that *Mitsein* can provide a ground for ethics, but the only way it can do so is through negotiating the normative conditions in what Heidegger calls das Man, and which Dreyfus translates as “The One.” Considering that Heidegger provides no clear normative argument on these grounds, this is a significant task.

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89 Heidegger, *Being and Time*. This discussion can be found in Chapter IV of Division One, pages 149-162 (113-129)
The idea of *Das Man* is that it provides the grounds upon which we know how to act in society. It is the equivalent of the knowledge required to conform into the society in which we live. There is a clear normative aspect here insofar as a certain amount of conformity is required in order to have a life in society. But conformity is also a negative if we value (individual) creativity and what happens if the norms of society are odious and ought to be resisted? The difficulty for any normative argument that tries to claim a normative political theory within *Being and Time* is that Heidegger simply does not provide clear answers to this question. Moreover, his own example of conforming to the expectations of the Nazi regime was pretty odious.

One route by which Heidegger can be rehabilitated into political theory is offered by Fred Dallmayr. Dallmayr builds on the distinction between politics and the political. The political is ontological whereas politics is about decision-making.\(^91\) The basic idea is that Heidegger’s contribution to political thought is via the political as opposed to politics. While Dallmayr’s article offers a helpful overview and introduction to Heidegger, and the distinction is insightful, it also does not sit well. It is as though political theorists are desperate to take something from Heidegger when they know all too well that his own life sets a rather terrible example. Indeed, this desire is actually quite understandable considering just how significant Heidegger’s influence on philosophy has been. The move that I want to take, however, is not to argue that Heidegger provides a grounds for ethics or take Dallmayr’s route. I also am not inclined to build on the secondary literature that turns not to Heidegger but to those he influenced as a location in which to develop normative political theory, as Simon Critchely does in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*.\(^92\)

Instead, I want to suggest that Heidegger is right to highlight how important *das Man* is, and he is also correct in emphasizing the importance of the hermeneutic circle. Taken together, these do not provide a normative argument, but we can take them as methodological points for political theory independent of Heidegger’s own questionable silence in *Being and Time* about the normative consequences of *das Man*.

To understand how we can develop this normative methodology we need to appreciate more fully what exactly *das Man* refers to and why it is possible to view this from a normative perspective. Hubert Dreyfus provides such an overview in his explanation of why there can exist a value statement within an (existential) analysis of *das Man*. As he writes,

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\(^91\) Dallmayr, "Rethinking the Political," 525.
According to Heidegger, our trouble begins with Socrates’ and Plato’s claim that true moral knowledge, like scientific knowledge, must be explicit and disinterested. Heidegger questions both the possibility and the desirability of making our everyday understanding totally explicit. He introduces the idea that the shared everyday skills, concerns, and practices into which we are socialised provide the conditions necessary for people to make sense of the world and of their lives. All intelligibility presupposes something that cannot be fully articulated — a kind of knowing-how rather than a knowing-that. At the deepest level such knowing is embodied in our social skills rather than our concepts, beliefs, and values. Heidegger argues that our cultural practices can direct our activities and make our lives meaningful only insofar as they are and stay unarticulated, that, as long as they stay the soil out of which we live.93

Heidegger then argues that the shared practices “into which we are socialised... provide a background understanding of what matters and what it makes sense to do, on the basis of which we can direct our actions.”94 This condition of being is described by Heidegger as “the clearing.”95 The claim is that we learn what matters to/for us within the cultural and social world in which we live.

Heidegger, of course, does not say what specifically should matter for us. However, I am not as interested in what Heidegger himself thought insofar as I am in how this argument clearly suggests that our sociability is itself a normative condition. To take an extreme but important example, we do not need an objective moral argument to be able to argue why the Holocaust was wrong. Indeed, if we require a rule of some kind to tell us why genocide is wrong, I’d say as human beings we are unable to interpret our world in any coherent normative way. Or, to look at this from a different direction: “Lessons for dealing with the sorts of issues that confront us in ordinary life, public or private, are not likely to be found in this [the Holocaust] most extraordinary of events.”96

Normative arguments need to make sense in regard to day-to-day issues, to our daily being-in-

94 Ibid., 351.
95 Being and Time p 171 (133)
the world. The search for normative principle of universal validity would need to be so broad as to be potentially vacuous, or so narrow as to be effectively useless.

There are sometimes when something is wrong, and as human beings we are able to respond to such situations as moral creatures because of our abilities for interpretation. In this sense, moral interpretations form part of our being. Our moral norms can and do change, and these changes can be reflected in our laws. But there have also always been unjust laws, like those in Nazi Germany or those that allowed for slavery, and the universal ideals of enlightenment morality did not preclude the possibility of either, so it seems illogical to presume the requirement of something that has not worked when it was most needed. It is not the rules that matter, but how we enter into the hermeneutic circle as normative beings (and scholars) that matters.

Deciphering which entry to use is, in some ways, easier said than done. What does it mean to enter into an interpretative understanding? “Understanding is”, as Mark Wrathall writes, “to be in the world in such a way that everything is projected upon, that is, makes sense in terms of particular possibilities. Projecting is not necessarily a cognitive act but a stance or orientation to things around us.” What this means is that understanding is not “a discrete type of activity” but is instead “a structure present in all meaningful activity.” Philosophy has traditionally treated thinking as a discrete activity, whereas in Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology it is not something separate to our being, but part of the structure of being itself. This means that we are already within the hermeneutic circle. Searching for the entry point only makes sense if we presume that we are outside, looking to get in. In Wrathall’s pragmatist interpretation of Heidegger, understanding is “the structure that makes all human activities activities as opposed to mere movements or events.” Wrathall’s argument is a response to Dreyfus’ classification of different types of understanding in Being and Time. As I am not concerned with trying to figure out what Heidegger meant, but rather use his philosophy heuristically, it is not imperative that we chose whether or not to pick which interpretation of Heidegger is the better one. Avoiding this temptation is all the more important because Wrathall argues that interpretation is not primarily concerned with “making explicit”, which as we have already seen, is what Taylor argues is central

98 Ibid.
99 Ibid., 188. Emphasis in original.
100 See, Dreyfus, "Being-in-the-World."
to hermeneutic interpretation. In this regard, and learning from Taylor, Wrathall and Dreyfus, we can now provide an example of how to employ hermeneutic phenomenology for political theory.

To demonstrate this, I will use an example borrowed from Wrathall, when he turns to baseball to explain the structure of projection. Baseball provides a situation in which there are norms and rules which have been created by people and which constitute the structure of the game. These rules and norms enable us to understand – to project – what a baseball bat is for, how it is intended to be used (and not used). Our projection of the bat also involves (indeed, requires) other projections that go along with the bat, and which pertain to bases, pitcher, different types of pitches, swings, etc.\textsuperscript{101} Along with these projections, the rules and norms of the game involve behaviour (not all of which are pleasant, such as tobacco chewing and spitting) and provide the basis for what is acceptable (behaviour) and what is possible (why a foul ball hit out of bounds is not a home run). Baseball players have to conform to these norms and rules in order to play, but they can also improvise. They are able to interpret the rules for themselves, while already being within the world of these rules. The rules do limit the number of players on a team and on the diamond at any given time. However, in principle anybody can play baseball. All they need is some gear, some people to play with, and a place to play. Even when there are rules that ostensibly govern a set activity, there are also other contexts outside of these rules that then can have an impact on the world in which these rules pertain. This type of thinking is what characterizes political theory: the normative interpretation in which different worlds collide.

Note that there are normative features within baseball but there are also normative features outside of baseball that have influenced it, like segregation did. Political theory focuses on precisely these moments, when our normative values and our understandings come into conflict with other values and understandings, and it is the role of political theory to provide normative guidance for how to interpret such situations and then function within them as social or political critics. “Hermeneutic-interpretation on the other hand, is committed to a kind of holism … that recognises that the explanation of behaviour, ideas, beliefs, and so on requires reference to the larger complex of background practices, historical situation, and linguistic community that helps constitute and define the behaviour in question.”\textsuperscript{102} The strength of the argument will depend on its ability to be understood and to reveal normative features that otherwise lay unseen.

\textsuperscript{101} Wrathall, "Heidegger on Human Understanding," 191.
\textsuperscript{102} Gibbons, "Hermeneutics, Political Inquiry, and Practical Reason," 566.
Conclusion

One of the fundamental insights in hermeneutic phenomenology is that methodologically, it is easy to take a lot for granted. In particular, “what is taken for granted is the being of things as we first see them and the way in which we see them, such that they can be available for classification.”\(^{103}\) Furthermore, “When we stop using things and start to consider them as objects for analysis, and when we consider ourselves as objective analyzers, we forget the worlds we take for granted, and therefore we forget our own standing in them.”\(^{104}\) Heidegger’s *Being and Time* is largely about providing a philosophical language in which to bring forward what is forgotten and taken for granted. In this sense, Heidegger’s philosophy is a radical methodological critique that constantly reminds us of just how much we have to take for granted. As political theorists our primary methodological currency is necessarily interpretation, but what exactly this means is easily forgotten, perhaps because it seems so obvious. Yet each of us has different ways of assessing interpretations, and in judging what types of arguments are more persuasive or more insightful. The standards by which we make such judgements are methodological, but if interpretations can only take place within the context of other interpretations, then our methodological foundation is within the hermeneutic circle. It is within this circle that political theory methodology rests, and as such, we need to understand and consider our own methodological positions from within this circle. As Michael Gibbons notes, “…typically, we compare competing claims to knowledge or competing interpretations with each other. That being the case, one test of the truth of an interpretation in human affairs is the extent to which it helps us understand or articulate the background pre-understanding that is the condition of our coping with or negotiating the world.”\(^{105}\) Such interpretation is necessarily normative because “it often ends up taking a form of knowledge that is directed toward offering new understandings that also offer new ways to engage in the political life it seeks to explain.”\(^{106}\) Interpretation is necessarily normative, and because interpretation is central to our being, our positionality and thus reflexive awareness is also necessarily a part of our interpretative abilities. As political theorists engaged in normative critique, interpretation and the hermeneutic circle are central to the vocation. However, so too are judgements about positionality and the extent by which reflexivity is

\(^{103}\) Blitz, "Heidegger and the Political," 172.
\(^{104}\) Ibid., 182.
\(^{106}\) Ibid.
methodologically important (if who we are and what we think about who we are matters). Empirical claims, including a causal dynamic that links ideas to practice or values to judgement, also lie somewhere in the political theorist's toolbox. All of these are addressed in some fashion in hermeneutic phenomenology.

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