Interviste / Interviews

Political Theory, Political Science and Public Policy: an Interdisciplinary Approach. A Conversation with Robert Goodin

Giulia Bistagnino*

Abstract: In this interview, Robert Goodin discusses some of the main issues he has tackled in his work, with a particular focus on the relation between political theory and political science, and the challenges and benefits of an interdisciplinary approach for political philosophers.

Keywords: Robert Goodin, Political philosophy, Political science, Interdisciplinary approach.

Robert Goodin is Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and of Social and Political Theory in the Research School of Social Sciences of the Australian National University in Canberra. He obtained a D.Phil in Politics at Oxford in 1975, and taught Government at the University of Essex. He is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia and a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy. His co-authored book *Discretionary Time* won the 2009 Stein Rokkan Prize for Comparative Social Science Research, awarded by the International Social Science Council.

Goodin is founding Editor of *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, having previously served as Co-editor of the *British Journal of Political Science*, and as an Associate Editor of *Ethics*. He was General Editor of the eleven-volume series of *Oxford Handbooks of Political Science* for Oxford University Press.

Goodin's work focuses on political theory and political science. His books in print include: *Political Theory & Public Policy* (University of Chicago Press, 1982); *Protecting the Vulnerable* (University of Chicago Press, 1985); *Reasons for Welfare* (Princeton University Press, 1988); *No Smoking: Ethical Issues* (University of Chicago Press, 1989); *Motivating Political Morality* (Blackwell, 1992); *Green Political Theory*

* Post doc, Università degli Studi di Milano e Centro di Ricerca e Documentazione Luigi Einaudi.

(Polity, 1992); *Utilitarianism as a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); *Reflective Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2003); *What's Wrong with Terrorism?* (Polity, 2006)*; Innovating Democracy: Democratic Theory & Practice After the Deliberative Turn* (Oxford University Press, 2008); *On Settling* (Princeton University Press, 2012).

He is currently working on a new book entitled *An Epistemic Theory of Democracy*, co-authored by Kai Spiekermann.

G.B.: Let us start with a question about the book you are currently working on now, namely "An Epistemic Theory of Democracy", which is co-authored by Kai Spiekermann. In this work you have decided to provide a strong defence of Condorcet's jury theorem, namely the fascinating mathematical theorem stating that if the members of a group, faced with a binary choice for which there is a correct or better answer, are individually more likely than chance to choose the right answer, then the group under majority rule can perform much better than any of the individuals. Why do you think that the epistemic approach to democracy is the most appropriate and relevant one? In other words, why do you think the procedural account is not enough, or cannot capture what is the point of democracy?

B.G.: Well, we aren't so much providing a 'defence' of the Condorcet Jury Theorem as scoping out what would be the implications, if it were indeed applicable to the real world. It may not be; that is an empirical question of whether the assumptions upon which it is based actually hold in the real world. In its original formulation, it was based on some pretty strong assumptions – although we show in that book that those assumptions can be relaxed substantially, and broadly the same results still emerge.

But to answer your real question: we do not think of the epistemic defence of democracy as being in competition with the procedural account; rather, we see it as a supplement to that. That the vote of the majority is likely to track the truth is just yet another good-making feature of democracy. It's definitely not the only thing to be said in its favour, and it may not even be the most important thing to be said in its favour. Still, it is definitely one good thing about democratic systems of government that they are systematically much more competent at tracking important truths of the world, and at choosing means appropriate to their chosen ends.

G.B.: Given your previous and influential interests in democracy and its institutional design, I would like to ask you how you see the place for deliberation and participation within contemporary democratic societies.

B.G.: For a start, 'deliberation' and 'participation' are very different things. Carole Pateman was rightly firm on this point, in her recent Presidential Address to the American Political Science Association[1]. Most of my own work has focused on 'deliberation', so let me concentrate on that in my reply.

Deliberative democracy was a model born of political theory, operating at some distance from the real world. Habermas' original 'ideal speech situation' was just that: an ideal. And his 'discourse ethics' were (in large measure) just that: normative prescriptions, rather than empirical descriptions[2]. Democratic theorists' initial engagements with that model were on the normative level. But in the middle period

(when in Jim Bohman's phrase deliberative democratic theory 'came of age'), they started looking for ways to operationalize their models empirically[3].

The form that those operationalizations originally took were 'mini-publics' – Deliberative Polls, citizen's juries, and such like – often convened either by academics or anyway outsiders to the political process. And the challenge was then to figure out how such events could be made to connect with the 'main game' of politics. There are various ways that they can: John Dryzek and I showed that (in an article that was in effect 'crowd-sourced': we wrote to all our deliberative democrat friends asking for their 'favourite examples of success', and we got plenty!)[4].

But I should also point out that there are 'deliberative' elements in most democratic designs that don't necessarily involve widespread public participation. The upper chamber in a bicameral legislature it typically called the 'deliberative chamber': being smaller, it is more conversable; operating with longer terms in office, it is less subject to the 'heat of the moment'. Courts engaging in judicial review of legislation are another deliberative element in the design of democratic institutions: indeed, they were Rawls's primary example of that[5]. In China, Deliberative Polls are increasingly being used to guide local infrastructure planning – and there, deliberative mechanisms are favoured precisely because they are minimally participatory, they do not fill up Tiananmen Square[6].

G.B.: Now that we have talked about your contribution to the philosophical debate about democracy, I would like to know more about what you think about democracy in practice. It is a fact that nowadays there is a widespread and shared feeling among citizens of liberal and democratic societies that there is some deficit and a gap between the people and not only the politicians, but also those experts and bureaucrats that are involved in the processes of decision-making. What do you think about this phenomenon? Do you believe current democracies are actually suffering such deficit? And, if this is the case, what antidotes do you envisage?

B.G.: Good question. Expertise is indispensable. It would be a stupid democracy that dispensed with it altogether. But in a democracy, the rule has to be 'experts propose, the electorate disposes'. Politicians (or anyway the parties they represent) stand for re-election, and when they do they have to justify to the electorate what they have done.

That they have followed the best advice available is one way they can try to justify their record to the electorate. But if that advice was wrong, politicians are likely to lose office anyway – and rightly so. Politics should be seen as an ultra-hazardous activity, to which strict liability applies: if it happened on your watch, it was your fault.

It is well worth recalling, in this connection, that experts are often much less reliable than they purport to be. The findings of Tetlock suggest that purported experts are much less reliable than large numbers of people in the wider community[7].

G.B.: Democracy is not the only topic you covered, your investigations are well-know to be crossing many different themes and issues: some may say that you can be seen as a fox more than hedgehog, to use Berlin's fortunate distinction. Do you see a sort of fil rouge among the issues you've focused on or you were just moved by different concerns?

B.G.: In my view it is the article or the book, rather than the author that should be the relevant unit of argumentative analysis. For my own part, anyway, I've never been fussed that there should be a coherent 'Goodin line' that runs consistently throughout all of my publications. Instead, in each article or book, I've taken up one argument and followed it to its own logical conclusion. The integrity I have always sought is in the logic and the argument, not in the corpus of the author's work as a whole.

That said, I guess there probably is some deeper coherence and consistency running across all of my writings, simply reflecting my basic intuitions and deeper philosophical commitments (yea, prejudices). I am at root a welfare consequentialist, interested in the morality of public policies rather than private actions; and I am inclined toward rule-consequentialism simply because the task of public policy is to prescribe rules rather than individual actions on a one-off basis. I am a universalist, who can see a place for special duties only if they are ultimately grounded in general ones. And so on.

When collecting my early writings on political theory and public policy in two books, therefore, I was pleasantly surprised how well they fit together in that way[8]. But that was unintentional, or anyway something that happened 'behind my back' rather than being at the front of my mind as the time I was writing each of the essays that went into those collections.

G.B.: In your work, you have deeply analysed the reasons we may have to justify welfare provisions. Do you think the justification you provided is still relevant today? Do you think some of those arguments should accommodate the current political and economic situation?

B.G.: Certainly they are still morally relevant; whether they can be sold to people politically is perhaps a separate issue...

My principal argument for the welfare state is in terms of 'protecting the vulnerable'. My claim is that we have special duties to protect those whose actions are particularly vulnerable to our actions and choices. We have duties to protect them, rather than exploiting our position of power over them for our own advantage. And I argued for that principle by showing that it provided the best account of all sorts of other special duties that we acknowledge readily in our ordinary lives: duties toward our families, toward people with whom we have signed contracts, toward our employees and our customers. The same principle of 'protecting the vulnerable' that underlies all those familiar special duties, I argued, also implied that we should make adequate collective provision for the poor.

But in arguing for the welfare state in that way, I was acknowledging from the start that we have all sorts of duties toward other people who are also vulnerable to us in various other ways. And of course those might from time to time come into conflict with our vulnerability-based duties toward the poor. In my book *Protecting the Vulnerable,* I argued that we also have vulnerability-based duties toward future generations, to leave them a liveable environment and adequate resources, for example – and in light of today's economic woes one might reasonably add to that list that we have a similar duty not to leave them burdened with unsustainable levels of debt[9]. But when vulnerability-based duties come into conflict with one another,

and we can honour only one but not both of those duties, we ought to decide which to honour by assessing whose interests are *more* vulnerable to our actions and choices.

So, for example, in the debt case, those who loaned us the money are vulnerable to our actions and choices in defaulting on the loan. But their interests overall might be less badly damaged if we defaulted than would the interests of others vulnerable to our actions and choices in doing what it takes to repay those debts. My model does not give you a formula for deciding what to do when vulnerability-based duties clash, but it does at least give you a framework for how to think about that.

G.B.: Another characteristic of your work is that of balancing political philosophy, politics, and the study of public policies. How do you see the relation between political philosophy and political science?

B.G.: In one sense they are completely different subjects: one answers the 'is' question, the other the 'ought' question. But below that first glib schoolboy line of reply, there are all sorts of interactions between those two sets of questions.

Why do we as political scientists study the things that we do, and not other things? Because not all facts are created equal. Some simply matter a whole lot more than others – and that is a value judgment.

Similarly, moving in the other direction, 'ought implies can'. If the fact of the matter is that there is no way in which we can do something (now or later, with our current resources and skills or with ones that we can acquire), then there is no pragmatic point in political philosophers telling us we 'ought' to do it. A cottage industry on 'political feasibility' and theorizing for 'non-ideal' situations has recently grown up around that simple thought.

Much of my own work has been at the intersection of political theory and public policy; and to make any useful contribution at that intersection you have to be prepared to dirty your hands digging up some facts about the policies in question, their sources, their consequences, and their realistic alternatives. My advice is simply, 'It's really not that hard' – to get enough of a grip on the facts of the matter to usefully bring your political theory to bear on the problem, anyway.

Here's one example. I once wrote an extended survey article on the ethics of nuclear power generation (that was post-Three Mile Island but prior to Chernobyl and Fukushima)[10]. As I said, I'm a consequentialist at root. So I had to try to figure out what were the likely, or anyway all-too-possible, prospects and consequences of a nuclear reactor melting down, what were the prospects and consequences of a leak from sites that would have to store wastes from nuclear reactors that would remain dangerously radioactive for millennia, and so on. All that involved a fair bit of digging around in semi-technical literatures, for which have no deeper background that schoolboy physics. But nothing more than that, and a little patience and persistence in following up references, was required. Could I build a nuclear power plant at the end of it? No. Could I write a pretty well informed piece of theoretically informed policy analysis? For sure.

G.B.: More in general, do you think interdisciplinary work is still worth pursuing nowadays, given the tendency of overspecialization we are experiencing? Indeed, it

seems to me in all areas of philosophy (although in some more than others) discussions are becoming not only more and more sophisticated, but also more and more narrow. So, attempts to merge reasoning in political philosophy with insights from other discipline appear discouraging and solitary.

B.G.: I would have thought it's all the more worthwhile, particularly for that reason. From a narrowly careerist perspective, if there are fewer people working in some area there is likely to be more low-hanging fruit there to be picked, more clearly true and important things that remain to be said on the subject for the first time.

From a broader perspective, 'big picture' work simply has to matter much more than narrowly specialist work. Much though you might admire the technical virtuosity of a miniaturist, her outputs are almost invariably something for the curiosity cupboard than of any greater consequence. And when lots of narrow specialists build on the work of one another, each iteration tends to be more rococo than the last. Before long you end up with something that resembles the worst of medieval philosophy (debating how many angels can dance on the head of a pin) or medieval astronomy (with epicycles being piled on epicycles to try to account for planetary motion through the sky).

One last comment on your characterization of interdisciplinary work as 'solitary'. It's anything but that. You are engaging with a far wider set of authors than you would be doing if you confined yourself to some narrow specialist topic debated among only a dozen or so people. Indeed, probably the best way to do interdisciplinary work is by co-authoring with people from the other discipline or disciplines relevant to your topic, if you are lucky enough to find such people interested in working with a political philosopher (and in my experience, plenty are). Co-authorship with other political philosophers can be great fun, too, even though it is less common; we at ANU, my home institution, are an exception in that regard. But whereas co-authoring with someone from the same discipline as yourself is more an act of pure sociability, co-authoring with people who have different disciplinary expertise is a genuine division of labour that brings with it clear efficiency dividends.

G.B.: I totally agree with your conviction in the importance of retaining a "big picture" perspective. So, I would like to ask you whether you think that the Rawlsian paradigm had an impact in this momentum of hyper-specialization. In particular, I am thinking about Rawls's idea of the independence of political philosophy from other areas of philosophical inquiry and its great influence in the past years.

B.G.: I am not myself particularly invested in the 'facts and principles' debate. Maybe, at some level, there are moral truths about politics that are wholly independent of any particular facts; maybe not. I do not myself see much at stake in that debate. What I am keen on emphasizing is that you need to engage deeply with facts and with other disciplines that can help inform you on those facts, in order to know how best to try to implement any moral principles in the social and political domain. And another bubble growing out of the Rawls corpus – the ideal versus non-ideal debate – pushes us in precisely that direction.

Rawls himself clearly talked to social scientists, at least when writing his first, best book. He did not do as much of that as I think he might have done, agreed. Still, I think

it would be a bit unfair to blame him for the fact-free silo in which so much subsequent political philosophy has been conducted in his wake.

If we're going to blame him for that, we should blame him in another way. Maybe what we should 'blame' him for (if 'blame' is the right term) is for leaving such a rich corpus for his successors to pick over. But my inclination, in that regard, is to blame the vultures rather than the carcass. In his own thesis book, *Political Argument*, my Oxford supervisor Brian Barry advised political philosophers that if they admired the Greek philosophers and wanted to be like them, the first thing they should do is to stop looking over their shoulders and to think for themselves[11]. I heartily commend that advice to contemporary political philosophers. It is all the more apt today than it was when Brian Barry first penned it.

G.B.: Finally, what are the most important challenges you think political philosophers are facing today? And if you had to provide an advice to a young researcher about a pressing topic to focus on, what would you suggest?

B.G.: I would like to think that the most important challenges facing political philosophers today are the same as those facing societies today. That is to say, I wish that political philosophers would let their agenda be set more what is happening in the real political world, and less by what seems to be the current trend within the discipline itself. (I would also advise against being overly attentive to trends on purely careerist grounds: by the time something has been identified as a trend, it has probably already passed its peak intellectually; all the interesting and important things have already been said, and whatever marginal tweaks there might be left to add are hardly worth bothering with).

Some of my best students and mentees have come out of a background in journalism. The level of analysis expected in a work of political philosophy is obviously much deeper. But journalists' nose for a good problem, keen powers of observation and quirky turn of mind seems to serve them well, if they decide to retool as political philosophers. My advice for someone wanting to do really interesting work in political philosophy, therefore, is to cultivate those skills of the journalist. Use those skills to identify a good problem and an interesting angle, and then let the distinctive skills of the philosopher to work in carrying the argument to greater depths than any journalist ordinarily would.

Of course, political philosophy is a broad tent. There's room in it for all sorts of work. And I would strongly advise an aspiring young researcher to cultivate a broad tool set and to work on all sorts of topics using all sorts of different methodologies. Otherwise you will bore yourself to tears. Thus, despite what I have just said about taking your philosophical problems from the problems facing society today, the book I am currently writing with Kai Spiekermann could fairly be characterized as a piece of applied mathematics (although we hope one with genuine implications for political institutions and practices).

One final word of advice. Don't pull your punches. Never be afraid to follow an argument wherever it leads. Speaking truth to power is the job of a political philosopher, and it's all the more important to do so when they seem insistently not to be listening. Someone will, sooner or later – or anyway there's a good enough prospect of that happening for it to be worth your trying.

Notes

[1] C. Pateman. (2012), "Participatory Democracy Revisited", *Perspectives on Politics*, 10, 7-19.

[2] In his original *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984, trans. T. McCarthy, Boston: Beacon Press) anyway. Habermas put a little – but only a little – more institutional flesh on the bones of his model in his subsequent *Between Facts and Norms* (1996, trans. W. Rehg, Oxford: Polity).

[3] J. Bohman, (1998), "The Coming of Age of Deliberative Democracy", *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 6, 399-423.

[4] R.E. Goodin, J.S. Dryzek, (2006), "Deliberative Impacts: The Macro-political uptake of Mini-publics", *Politics & Society*, 34, 219-244.

[5] J. Rawls, (1997), "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited", *University of Chicago Law Review*, 64, 765-807.

[6] J.S. Fishkin, B. He, R.C. Luskin, A. Siu, (2010), "Deliberative Democracy in an Unlikely Place: Deliberative Polling in China", *British Journal of Political Science,* 40, 435-448.

[7] P.E. Tetlock, (2005), *Expert Political Judgment*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

[8] R.E. Goodin, (1982), *Political Theory & Public Policy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; (1995) *Utilitarianism as a Public Philosophy*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

[9] R.E. Goodin, (1985), *Protecting the Vulnerable*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, ch. 6.

[10] R.E. Goodin,(1980), "No Moral Nukes", *Ethics*, 90, 417-449.

[11] B. Barry, (1965), *Political Argument*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, p. 290.