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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Demarcating normative political theory from political science – and why it matters methodologically (or cheering for a hybrid empirical–normative methodology in political theory)

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ABSTRACT

Scholars debating the methodology of political theory present arguments regarding the function of political science within/for normative political theory. We suggest a demarcation principle separating the core of normative political theory from political science. The suggested demarcation principle is: for a study to count as normative political theory it must include a core evaluative step, assessing the desirability (or lack thereof) of some political, social, legal or economic state of affairs. We present three views of the relations between normative political theory and empirical political science: 'pure normative', 'hybrid normative–empirical' and 'pure empirical'. We explore the methodological implications of the demarcation principle vis-a-vis the noted categories. The main one is that the methodology of normative political theory will most likely be dualistic, hybrid normative–empirical. This implies that political theory methodology must include both evaluative and empirical parts and techniques, to avoid a crucial failure in substantiating core aspects of political theory research.

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Recent debates in the methodology of political theory have presented arguments of various kinds regarding the function, location and relevance of empirical political and social science to normative political theory. Some scholars, such as G.A. Cohen¹ famously argued that at the level of principles, empirical political science has no place in normative theorizing. *Mutatis mutandis*, Daniel McDermott (2008) has argued that empirical political science and normative political theory answer different questions, and so should, generally speaking, be regarded as separate enterprises, agreeing with Cohen that empirical political science has no part in the core functions of normative political theory. Other scholars disagree: Keith Dowding (2020), Adrian Blau (2015), de Shalit (2020), Alice Baderin (2023) and Nahshon Perez (2023) have argued that empirical political science and normative theorizing are much closer than other scholars argue, and that empirical

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political science should be used to answer many aspects of normative political theory. Finally, Jonathan Floyd (2017; 2023) argues that considering what empirical political science can suggest will better serve normative political theory – as compared to the normal argumentation of political theory (what Floyd calls ‘mentalism’).

Examining this list of approaches, the current article aims to suggest a simple demarcation principle/line between the core of normative political theory and empirical political science. The demarcation principle is a clarification instrument, meant to denote the contours of normative political theory, before moving to explore methodological issues. Furthermore, understanding this demarcation principle would help to better comprehend the role that empirical political science will fulfil within (and for) normative political theory, and following, would help clarify what exactly is being disputed between the noted scholars – and why it methodologically matters.²

The suggested demarcation principle is as follows: for a study to count as normative political theory *it must include a core evaluative step, assessing the desirability (or lack thereof) of some political, social, legal or economic state of affairs.*³ Studies in the social sciences that are only or mostly descriptive or causal will not hence be classified as normative political theory. While the demarcation line suggested is fairly simple, working out its meaning and implications for the noted debate is more complex. A reading of major figures in contemporary analytical political theory such as Carens (2013) and Anderson (2017) reveals that they seldom stay on ‘one side’, empirical or normative, of the noted demarcation line. The same can be indicated with regard to the new ‘empirical political theorists’ such as de Shalit (2020) or Dowding (2020), where one would expect both normative and empirical and causal statements (and methodological approaches and techniques). Perhaps a more surprising observation is that the kind of research indicated by the methodological writings of McDermott (2008) is rare to the point that research in analytical normative political theory that remains only on the normative ‘side’ of the noted demarcation line does not represent the field as a whole; even McDermott himself, certainly makes empirical observations and points to causal mechanisms in some central points of his work on punishment and legitimate government (his non-methodological work (1999), see below). That is, even ‘pure normative’ political theorists do not follow their methodological directives in their work. Similarly, empirical political science cannot replace the core normative, evaluative aspect of political theory. Even Jonathan Floyd (2023), for example, in his normative behaviourism, has to point to some normative grounding to substantiate his prescriptive suggestions, in addition to his attempt to use empirical data as a normative grounding factor.

A major implication of the noted comments is that political theory research must engage with the social sciences *and* with evaluative techniques much more explicitly than is sometimes assumed. Any attempt to avoid each ‘side’ of the demarcation line will result in an incomplete research, as either the evaluative part or the empirical part will be left without supporting argumentation. This ‘dualistic’ conclusion might seem technical, but it brings about the following point: ignoring the methodological techniques of each side of the demarcation line will cause a given study in analytical, normative political theory to fail to deliver adequate evaluative conclusions, arguably the central task of normative political theory.⁴ To demonstrate this methodological-dualistic assertion, two studies, each aiming to be mainly (or even only) on ‘one side’ of the demarcation

line will be critically analysed, demonstrating the necessity of taking into account both sides of the demarcation line: Floyd's normative behaviourism (2017) on the empirical side of the demarcation line and Daniel McDermott (1999) on the normative side of the demarcation line.

This article will be structured in the following way. The following section presents three views of the relations between normative political theory and empirical political science: 'pure normative', 'hybrid normative–empirical' and 'pure empirical'. While somewhat rough categories, they aim to clarify some of the main current views of the division of labour between normative political theory and empirical political science. 'Normative Political Theory and Empirical Political Science' section presents the suggested demarcation principle or 'line', aiming to separate between the core of normative political theory and empirical political science: for a study to count as normative political theory *it must include a core evaluative step, assessing the desirability (or lack thereof) of some political, social, legal or economic state of affairs*. The specifications of this principle will be further explained in the second section, focusing on why this particular principle arguably 'captures' what is central to normative political theory. 'The Dualistic Methodological Implications' section explores the main methodological implications of this demarcation principle, of which the main one is arguably that the methodology of political theory will be dualistic, as most articles published in normative political theory can be classified as hybrid normative–empirical studies. This conclusion aims to demonstrate that normative political theorists who ignore this dual-methodological nature of political theory, will more often than not present incomplete studies, failing to explore the empirical aspects of their research, or the normative, evaluative aspects of their research. To demonstrate this point, two studies will be explored, one by Daniel McDermott (of the 'pure normative' category) and one by Jonathan Floyd (of the 'pure empirical' category); demonstrating how each fails to abide by the dualistic methodological conclusion suggested here.

Three views of the relationships between normative political theory and empirical political science: 'pure normative', 'hybrid normative–empirical' and 'pure empirical'

What are, and what should be, the relations between empirical political science and normative political theory? This question has come to trouble many political theorists in recent years. The background is the rise of interest in the methodology of political theory.⁵ As discussions of methods⁶ take place, scholars started asking about rules of inference, about kinds of evidence sufficed for arguing for, rejecting or accepting a given conclusion, the usage of data, the utilization of causal mechanisms, the adequate study of political institutions and behaviour, the adequate usage of hypothetical case studies, hypothetical examples and intuition pumps and on and on. Several scholars working within the contours of this methodological turn have strongly advocated that political theorists should study political institutions, rules and behaviour, utilizing various methods – qualitative and quantitative – depending on the research question at hand – these can include interviews, ethnographic work, text analysis, intensive studies of single cases, small N comparisons of cases, natural experiments, statistical analysis of large data sets and many other methods.⁷ Other scholars have presented a different approach, in which political theory, at least at the level of principles, should

be done independently of the methods and the output of empirical political science. This debate has created a range of opinions regarding the adequate position and usefulness of empirical political science (its methods and research output) for normative political theory.

It can be suggested to divide approaches within normative political theory regarding the adequate relations between normative political theory and empirical political science into three categories: 'pure normative', 'hybrid normative–empirical' and 'pure empirical'. Importantly, these different categories are not simply analytical constructs, they also suggest the place of empirical political science within normative political theory and suggest different methodological paths for political theorists; that is, a scholar adopting a given category implicitly also adopts prescriptive methodological elements for the relevant category and perhaps the field as a whole. In what follows, each category is presented.

Pure normative

In this category, the main role of normative political theory is evaluative. While it might not be the exclusive role, it is explicitly and purposefully the central objective of normative political theory. Any other scholarly aspect of normative political theory is peripheral. There are several formulations of this view. Daniel McDermott (2008), in perhaps one of the clearest statements regarding this topic, wrote as follows:

political philosophers aim to determine what ought to be done in light of that information. How should states be organized? What kinds of projects should they pursue? Are there some actions that are impermissible? No set of empirical facts can dictate the answers to these kinds of questions. You could pile up a mountain of data about the differences between, say, democracies and dictatorships, but without the normative element that is the political philosopher's concern, nothing would follow about which form of government ought to be implemented. (2008, 11)

According to McDermott, the main project of normative political theory is evaluative and normative, not descriptive or causal. McDermott suggests a clear cut division of labour between empirical political science which collects and analyses information (descriptive, causal and so on) regarding political institutions and behaviour, and normative political theory which is basically a sub-division of moral philosophy, aiming to reveal rules of justified relations between the citizen and the government:

Political philosophers traffic in 'oughts' – moral oughts. The discipline is thus a branch, or subset, of moral philosophy. Taking the citizen–state relationship as the target of their investigations, political philosophers try to figure out the implications of the requirements of morality for this relationship, a particular instance of the more general problem with which moral philosophers are concerned. (2008, 12)

What McDermott argues is that the structuring of a theory of justice does not need to concern itself with the output and content of social science research, as such is not relevant to the noted theory of justice. Importantly, both McDermott and Cohen do not disregard the importance of political science research, they simply relegate it to a later, practical or prescriptive part of research in political theory. It should also be added that scholars in this category acknowledge facts about humans and societies, but do not attribute normative weight to them in justifying fundamental principles of justice (it would be almost impossible to write a treaty on politics without using any term that

connects to any such ‘political’ concepts). What is important to us while classifying studies to the current category, is that in the core function of structuring evaluative principles (what are they, and their contours and their subject matters), that are used in normative political theory, the output, content and empirical methods of political science, serve no part.

Hybrid normative–empirical

Several authors argue that empirical political science should serve a central function within normative political theory. Here, caution is required, as is often the case with hybrid approaches, the different parts of such frameworks are intertwined with other aspects, and different scholars working within such hybrid approaches sometimes use various terms in their conceptual framework. What is important to us, however, is the following. In order for a study in normative political theory to be classified under the suggested hybrid normative–empirical category, its argumentative usage of empirical data⁸ based on empirical methods of investigation should be constitutive to the argument, approach or position the scholar is attempting to make or to promote. This can be done in various ways, such as the structuring of concepts, the choice of theories, the choice of cases, verification or falsification of normative claims that contain empirical statements, enriching and improving normative theories, and so on.⁹ If the empirical aspects of a given research are used only once the main aspects of normative political theory argumentation are completed, it would be classified as a pure normative style of research. This condition can be called the alteration condition – without the noted empirical aspects the author would have been engaged in a very different argument, approach or theory.¹⁰

Indeed, as a succinct survey of recent work in political theory can demonstrate,¹¹ various schools of thought (positive, political, contextual) are all in agreement that normative political theory should focus on exploring existing political institutions and behaviour as a way of distancing the discipline from the abstractions of ideal theory and moral philosophy. Joseph Carens demonstrates this approach while writing about immigration: ‘The real-world presupposition,¹² as I have described it, is pretty far along the normative continuum toward the way things are’ (2013, 305).¹³

The empirical–normative approach, typified by its hybridity, usually includes a study of some existing political institution, rule or norm, and an evaluative, normative step or aspect (Dryzek, Honig, and Phillips 2011, 62). Put together, these two aspects create a hybrid category whose goal is to maintain the exploration of some political rule, norm, institution or behaviour as they are, and the central evaluative part of normative political theory.

Pure empirical

In this category, normative political theory is constituted by the methods, causal mechanisms and research output of empirical political and social science. The argument grounding this category is roughly as follows: many of the ‘big questions’ of political theory will be answered by the results available from research conducted in political science and other social sciences. Similar to an early generation of positivists, many important

questions regarding the proper function of governmental institutions, according to this view, have already been answered.

Indeed, this view argues that once certain plausible assumptions are made regarding human welfare and flourishing, many debates regarding the institutional design of the government and its main organs within modern countries are already settled, such as between dictatorships and democracies. If the goal is better health care, longer life span, better education, less corrupt governments, less civil wars and so on, the answer as to which kind of government would better deliver such political and social results is already known. In contemporary normative political theory literature, the most well-known advocate of this approach is Jonathan Floyd, as he writes: 'In the new form of political philosophy proposed here, political principles are justified by what I call expressed political preferences. These preferences are normative preferences that get revealed by certain patterns of behaviour' (Floyd 2017, 168). Floyd focuses on two phenomena: 'the patterns of behaviour utilized by normative behaviourism, as I construct that idea in this book, are those involving two particular phenomena: (1) insurrection, and (2) crime' (Floyd 2017, 168).

Floyd's suggestion is that normative political theory as a school of thought must focus on the actual behaviour of persons. From these observations, argues Floyd, an inference regarding the preferable regime will present itself. Political regimes that demonstrate less insurrections and fewer crimes are to be preferred. Floyd accordingly concludes that liberal-social democracies are the preferable regimes (Floyd 2017, 172).

Floyd follows, *mutatis mutandis*, the footsteps of an earlier generation of positivists, who have made similar claims, regarding the supersession of ideology and normative thinking with the outcome of social science, as follows: 'the aim of both Comte's and Durkheim's versions of sociology was to find an objective and scientific account of the totality of social existence' (Lassman 2011, 448). Such an ambition would bring about a transformation of the functions of the politicians and of political theorists; as explained by Durkheim: the

duty of the statesmen is no longer to propel societies violently towards an ideal which appears attractive to him. His role is rather that of a doctor: he forestalls the outbreak of sickness by maintaining good hygiene, or when it does break out, seeks to cure it. (Durkheim, 1982: 104; quoted by Lassman 2011, 449)

While Floyd still functions within a form of reasoning grounding his reliance on political science sourced data in the context of the two categories (crime and insurrections), he is by far the most radical 'pure empirical' scholar in the current methodological literature, as exemplified by his critical treatment of the argumentative tradition of political theory which he calls 'mentalism' (2017).

Now that the three approaches are in front of us, it is possible to turn to the suggested demarcation line, which would allow for a clearer understanding of the noted disagreement regarding the place of empirical political science within normative political theory.

Normative political theory and empirical political science, a suggested demarcation

Before exploring the specifics of the proposed demarcation principle, it is important to consider why such a principle is necessary. This principle is intended to outline the boundaries of our methodological inquiry. In other words, when examining the methodology of

normative political theory, what core element commands our focus? Thus the principle to be introduced serves as a tool for clarification.

The suggested demarcation between normative political theory and political science is an old fashioned one. It suggests that what is essential to normative political theory, and would separate it from a typical descriptive or causal political science study, is *a core evaluative step, assessing the desirability (or lack thereof) of some political, social, legal or economic state of affairs*. It is not suggested that normative political theory is the only discipline that contains this attribute. However, for a study to count as normative political theory it must include this attribute, and typically it will be discussed explicitly, and will be, at the very least, one of the main features of the research.¹⁴ Note that the suggested demarcation principle is not new, and is built according to a well-known understanding of what is central to normative political theory. The aim here is to characterize many different studies in political theory, as such, it must be recognizable, similar to the attributes of Dworkinian interpretation (1986). Hence, it should capture and present the core of a familiar phenomenon, as Dworkin writes: ‘Roughly, constructive interpretation is a matter of imposing purpose on an object or practice in order to make of it the best possible example of the form or genre to which it is taken to belong’ (Dworkin 1986, 52). The advantage of constructive interpretation is that it would enable a meaningful conversation between the suggested demarcation principle and the political theory community that will recognize this principle. This could not have been made if the principle would have been stipulative. This mode of interpretation is hence advantageous in addition to the logic of the principle, which reflects the value-fact distinction going back to Hume.

In what follows it is explained what the demarcation principle/line is (see ‘A Core Evaluative Step’ section), and why, arguably, normative political theory is typified by a core evaluative step (see ‘Normative Political Theory’ section).

A core evaluative step, assessing the desirability (or lack thereof) of some political, social, legal or economic state of affairs – explaining the demarcation principle

What is meant by ‘evaluation’? Evaluation means (roughly) that the value, worth or success of X is being determined. In normative political theory the X in question is usually some political institution, rule, political behaviour or political occurrence. So in a normative political theory study, a given political institution is being evaluated to determine its value, worth or success, according to some standard.¹⁵ If the evaluated institution is not determined to have met the expected value, worth or success, a given theorist would suggest that it needs to be replaced by a different institution, cease to exist, or perhaps be rectified or improved in some manner. In unusual cases in which the value of a studied institution resembles the expected value in a scale or standard used by the theorist, the conclusion would be that the institution should be maintained.

Evaluation must mean that the existing institution would be compared to some standard. This means that the desirability of a certain political institution would be determined as compared to some standard. Of course, different theorists will indicate different principles grounding this standard – such as social contract theories, utilitarianism, rights theories, virtue ethics and many others. For the methodological purposes of this article, it

does not matter, as long as an evaluative step can be identified in a given research. While most political theorists do not usually use a formalized language or a formalized scale, the evaluation of some political institution is actually a common structure of contemporary political theory research. Joseph Carens, for example, argues that deporting a person who spent most of her life in country X violates democratic principles (2013). Elizabeth Anderson argues that race-based segregation does not meet her principle that one's race should not determine one's life prospects (2010). Nozick (1974) argues that taxation is impermissible – all of them compare a certain, existing political institution or rule to their preferred principles in an evaluative step in their research.

The formulation *A core evaluative step, assessing the desirability (or lack thereof) of some political, social, legal or economic state of affairs* specifically avoids identifying a specific ethical or principled view that would ground or justify the evaluative step. There are many different conceptions and theories, regarding how to evaluate political institutions, and the disagreements regarding such different evaluations (are they grounded in rights? social contracts? utilitarianism? etc.) are persistent and bitter. These debates tend to be so intense and severe arguably, because deciding which evaluative principle is the 'correct' one would give rise to demands, not requests or asking for something, but demands, from other individuals or governments, to do or not do something, and in cases of failure to comply, a rectification is expected, at times also accompanied with various kinds of sanctions.

This diversity of views regarding evaluative principles is to be expected in our methodological context, as the demarcation principle is, and should be, wide enough to include many and various evaluative approaches. For our methodological needs, there is no need to pinpoint an exact meaning of any one specific evaluative principle, rather, what is required is to classify the kind of function such principles would fulfil within a methodological framework of normative political theory. Here, something much simpler would suffice, as long as it captures a sufficient number of existing approaches to the topic; hence, as long as a given study includes a core evaluative step, the identity of the evaluative principle does not matter.¹⁶

What would concern us in this succinct explanation is that a standard of evaluation is different from a description of what people actually receive. A standard of evaluation will be determined following some exploration of 'ought', not what 'is'; that is, following some moral or political theory. This can be some deontological approach, a utilitarian approach, some social contract view, virtue ethics, religious principles, a given theory of rights, natural law, a view of fairness, or any other. It can also cover various concepts in political theory, for example, justice (usually connected to some form of allocation), legitimacy (usually connected to some form of justification and/or institutional arrangement owed to citizens) and so on. For our methodological concerns, it does not matter, as long as a standard of evaluation is understood as a non-descriptive criterion.

The notion that normative political theory is typified by a core evaluative step, assessing the desirability (or lack thereof) of some political, social, legal or economic state of affairs

The suggested demarcation principle is not stipulative. Rather, it is rooted in what is arguably a widely-used and repeated attribute of studies in contemporary normative political

theory. While it is not possible to point here to a widespread quantitative analysis of methods in contemporary analytical political theory as such a study does not exist, it can be pointed to numerous well-known studies, in which a reader can locate a common methodological step, in which an author evaluates, explicitly or implicitly, a given political institution, and the evaluation is grounded in some standard. For example, the structure of argumentation by Elizabeth Anderson can be indicated, and her critique of contemporary workplace conditions in the USA as she writes:

Most workplace governments in the United States are dictatorships, in which bosses govern in ways that are largely unaccountable to those who are governed. They do not merely govern workers; they dominate them. This is what I call private government. I offer this model as a critical tool to help us focus on important and problematic features of our world that affect the vital interests of workers. (Anderson 2017, xxii–xxiii)

Anderson compares current work conditions in the USA to (roughly) a standard of respect towards employees and finds the current institutions/set of rules to be lacking. A similar structure can be found in the famous ‘philosophers’ brief’, in which six well-known moral and political philosophers presented their view regarding physician assisted suicide. As they write:

it is intolerable for the government to dictate that doctors may never, under any circumstances, help someone to die who believes that further life means only degradation. The Constitution insists that people must be free to make these deeply personal decisions for themselves and must not be forced to end their lives in a way that appals them, just because that is what some majority thinks proper. (Dworkin et al. 1997, 43)

What the distinguished philosophers are doing, methodologically speaking, is to compare a given rule, to a standard which should ground the proper rule in their view, and find the current rule to be unacceptable. Another example, currently widely in use, can be found in many environmental studies in normative political theory, such as by D. Moellendorf (2017), which contains an explicit evaluation of economic growth policies from the perspective (or standard of evaluation) of environmental impact. Moellendorf’s article is a good example for an explicit evaluative step regarding some political institutions (in this case, economic institutions’ understanding of growth), which is found lacking as compared to the noted standard, and the conclusion is that it needs to be amended.

The methodological structure of Anderson, the six famous philosophers and Moellendorf’s piece is similar, in that a given institution/rule is compared to a given standard of evaluation, found lacking, and the result is that the theorist reaches the conclusion that the institution should be rectified, cease to exist, or be replaced.¹⁷

The conclusion suggested here is hence that this methodological structure, of an evaluation grounded in some standard, is a widespread attribute in normative political theory. However, the demarcation line is a clarification instrument, aimed to elucidate the main features of normative political theory. It does not provide an answer to the adequacy of empirical political science to or within normative political theory. The following section, therefore, brings first section and second section together, to understand what is the proper location and function of empirical political science within normative political theory, and the methodological implications of this location and role.

The dualistic methodological implications of the suggested demarcation principle

If the noted demarcation principle is adopted as a useful description of a central attribute of normative political theory, what are the implications for the methodology of normative political theory? Here a cautious approach is required. The reason is that the implications of the demarcation line seem to be different for each of the approaches discussed in the first section earlier. In the 'pure normative' category, the expectation is that methods on the 'side' of the demarcation line pointing to principles designating some standards of evaluation will be found. In 'hybrid normative–empirical' the expectation is to find methods that would enable pointing to principles designating some standards of evaluation, *and* methods that would enable the understanding of some political institution/rule/behaviour that would be the target of such an evaluation, such as are accustomed in political science. Finally, in 'pure empirical' the expectation is to find only such methods that would enable understanding of some political institution/rule/behaviour such as are accustomed in political science.

Our focus in the current section would be on the 'pure normative' and 'pure empirical' categories, as they aim to represent approaches to the methodology of political theory that are indifferent to one kind of methodology: the former to the social sciences, the latter to the argumentative tradition of political theory. These two categories directly challenge the main argument of the current article that a typical study in normative political theory would involve both normative argumentation and social science sourced data and research methods.

Our conclusion in this section, following a detailed examination of the studies by McDermott (representing the 'pure normative' category) and Floyd (representing the 'pure empirical' category), would be that both self-proclaimed representations of 'pure normative' and 'pure empirical' categories enact, regardless of how such studies present themselves, reliance on both kinds of research methods. This 'dual reliance' supports our claim that normative political theory would include both kinds of research approaches, empirical and normative. This conclusion requires elaboration, and each approach will be observed in turn, beginning with the 'pure normative' category (see 'Pure Normative' section) represented by McDermott, followed by Floyd's representation of the 'pure empirical' category (see 'Pure Empirical' section); in 'Why Hybrid Normative–Empirical Methodology Matters' section, the implications of the noted assessment that hybrid normative–empirical methods are dominant in normative political theory are explored. A final cautious point: our aim here would be narrow – to indicate that most normative political theories contain two kinds of statements (empirical and evaluative), and both require different techniques to be substantiated. Ignoring this duality, will create an unexplained gap in research design. Larger issues of the nature and goals of political theory will be left to another occasion.¹⁸

Pure normative

In this category, it is expected to find methods connected to the creation and structuring of principles designating some standards of evaluation. However, examining seminal examples of contemporary normative political theory reveal that even such studies that

aim to be only evaluative and normative, use data, factual statements and pointing to causal mechanisms.

Here, a useful example is McDermott's scholarly work. McDermott's approach typifies political theory as a discipline that fits the 'pure normative' category.¹⁹ I shall use as an example his article titled 'The duty to punish and legitimate government' (1999). McDermott's article deals with an interesting challenge; whether it is possible to accept the critique of consent in liberal theory (mainly directed contra Lockean versions of consent), and yet to enable some sort of a plausible (i.e. not based on consent, yet not rights' violating²⁰) central agency/authority for executing punishment following rights' violations. While the intricacies of McDermott's fascinating article, attempting to replace 'consent' with 'duty' as a justification for establishing a central agency for punishment, are beyond the interest of the current article, his inferential steps or methodology are of great interest to us, and will be our focus here.

McDermott mostly explores his duty-based argumentation in a manner that is fact insensitive, that is, the output of social science research plays no part in his theorizing.²¹ However, at one crucial point in his argumentation, McDermott does turn to political and social science. McDermott argues that a central agency/authority should have the exclusive ability to punish wrongdoers, roughly representing the duty to punish wrongdoers for the entire population. McDermott argues that this would be the most efficient manner of executing punishment. This step is crucial for McDermott's argumentation, as this central agency/authority is very similar, if not identical to a state, and hence something like a state can be legitimate without the grounding factor of consent.²²

This is how he writes: 'So if one central punishing authority is the most efficient way to ensure that our duty to punish is fulfilled, then we can make a case that a state could be legitimate, even without consent' (1999, 166). In a crucial footnote at the same page, he adds: 'This is, of course, in part an empirical claim, since the case in favour of one central punishing authority is based on proving that such a monopoly will be more efficient than a number of competing agencies' (1999, 166, f.n. 50).

Note that if McDermott is mistaken regarding this empirical point, his argument for the so-called 'central punishing authority/agency' fails. That is, the 'central punishing authority/agency' will not be established, rather, many different 'punishing agencies' will be established (via the efforts of individuals in a Lockean state of nature, wishing to punish wrongdoers), and something like a state, which requires a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, will never be formed. As the goal of McDermott's argumentation was to demonstrate that something like a state can be structured without requiring consent, then this would mean a failure of his entire argument. This implies that the noted empirical point is not a minor after-thought, but a crucial element of his theoretical framework.

Four points present themselves at this point. First, McDermott's substantive-normative research deviates from the 'pure normative' method that he advocates in his methodological article explored in the 'Pure Normative' section earlier. His substantive-normative claim depends on the veracity of an empirical claim, the exact opposite to his suggested/preferred methodological view. It is an interesting question whether McDermott could have structured his framework differently, as to avoid indicting an empirical point; he could have just written something like, 'in a different world in which a central agency is the most efficient option, here is what follows', but he choose differently, as he

wanted (as far as I understand his article) that his framework would correspond to the world in which we live, in the here and now. Second, it is at the very least interesting that one of the major advocates of the ‘pure normative’ method does not actually adopt it. While this is not a fatal blow to the possibility of the ‘pure normative’ category, it is a noteworthy point of reference to the difficulty of following such a methodology in a consistent manner in a field such as political theory. Put differently, the critique suggested of McDermott’s writings does not rule-out the option of writing pure normative political theory all-together, simply that it is rather difficult to do so in a consistent manner; and that it is certainly a rare option in contemporary political theory. Third, McDermott does not substantiate his empirical claim regarding the supposed-efficiency of the ‘central punishing agency/authority’ in any manner that points to empirical investigations of such claims or similar claims. That is, McDermott simply leaves it as an educated guess. This point demonstrates the importance of naturalizing within political theory adequate knowledge of political science research output, and of adjacent fields such as (in this case) economics. Notably, it seems that his argument that one central institution, without any competition, would be more efficient than multiple such agencies is unusual,²³ and at the very least requires further evidence. Fourth and last, our observation regarding the methodology of McDermott applies also to major figures of contemporary political theory such as Rawls and Dworkin. As such, our exploration is not intended as a critique of McDermott’s research, which is interesting and insightful,²⁴ it is simply a sober acknowledgment that it is difficult to produce a study in political theory which never makes empirical or causal statements, which are important for the relevant scholar’s arguments. Indeed, R.M. Hare in a key critical article regarding Rawls’ method of constructing his theory of justice, noticed that Rawls’ makes many such empirical statements, which are indispensable to Rawls’ arguments, as Hare writes:

Rawls ... thinks of a theory of justice as analogous to a theory in empirical science. It has to square with what he calls ‘facts’ ... But what are these facts? They are what people will say when they have been thinking carefully. (Hare 1989, 82)

This of course describes Rawls’ famous ‘reflective equilibrium’, as Rawls writes: ‘There is, however, another side to justifying a particular description of the original position. This is to see if the principles which would be chosen match our considered convictions of justice ...’ (1999, 17). George Klosko makes a similar observation regarding Rawls’ usage of empirical statements, in his treatment of ‘overlapping consensus’, and points to the incorrect understanding by Rawls’ of American political culture (Klosko 1993). Notably, these two partly ‘empirical’ parts of Rawls’ theorizing (reflective equilibrium and overlapping consensus) are not an after-thought for Rawls, rather they are central aspects of his approach, without which his theory would be very different.²⁵

Likewise, Dworkin makes many empirical observations as he develops his own principles of justice, including the fact of religious pluralism as to justify liberal neutrality (2000, 229). Dworkin also makes wide usage of empirical information regarding societal preferences and scarcity of resources in his structuring of the ‘parameters of justice’, aiming to exclude such from the definition of ‘brute bad luck’, and hence excluding such cases from justified governmental compensation for brute bad luck (in his debate with G.A. Cohen); this means that absent such data, it would be impossible to construct a ‘Dworkinian’ just allocation of resources (Dworkin 2000, 298–299).²⁶

While the examples of Rawls, Dworkin and McDermott do not substitute a quantitative analysis of the field of normative political theory as a whole, they are helpful in demonstrating how difficult (and rare) it is to structure an evaluative, normative theory absent empirical data regarding the functionality of the social and political world.²⁷

Pure empirical

In this category, normative political theory is constituted by the methods, causal mechanisms and data of empirical political and social science. The traditional and familiar argumentative style of studies in contemporary analytical political theory is replaced, almost in full, by the process and output of political science and other social sciences. However, a close reading of a seminal example of this category, Jonathan Floyd, reveals normative argumentation.²⁸ This means that even self-proclaimed advocates of this category are not faithful to its principles. This conclusion requires elaboration, as follows.

According to Floyd's approach described in the 'Pure Empirical' section earlier, the identification of patterns of crime and insurrections is sufficient to point to a preferred regime. According to Floyd's framework, we can apply the identified preferences to institutional design; political theorists should hence 'follow the data'.²⁹

But is this really the case? Floyd considers revealed preferences, observed via fewer insurrections and lower crime rates, as a way to point to a preferable regime. However, what grounds the centrality of revealed preferences? Well, the centrality of revealed preferences is often justified via the importance attributed to individual choice (among liberal theorists), and individual choice, in turn, is often grounded in the importance of individual autonomy (Dan-Cohen 1992; Raz 1986, 154).

So a structure of argumentation in Floyd's framework is observed, which is roughly as follows: revealed preferences ought to be centrally considered as the choices of individuals enable them to build their life as they wish them to be. A theoretical framework that attributes such centrality to preferences and choice – as to point to the preferred mode of governance – must be grounded in the importance of autonomy.³⁰ But autonomy, while respected by liberal-perfectionists such as Raz (1986) is heavily disputed – Dworkin (1978) argues that neutrality is central to liberal political theory and Parekh (2000) rejects autonomy as being parochial to European historical developments. These disputes are well known of course, and if Floyd were to join them explicitly that would surely present a most valuable addition to this literature. Regardless, what is central to our analysis is that Floyd's framework does not simply 'follow the data', rather it is rooted in normative thinking that must be argued for, and cannot be superseded by directing the reader to data regarding crime and insurrection.³¹

Four points present themselves here, central to our methodological exploration. First, similar to our conclusion in the 'pure normative' category, Floyd does not remain on one side of the demarcation line, rather his research involves both usage of social science research and normative research; while the former is explicit, the latter is implicit. The conclusion is that studies in normative political theory, more often than not, involve both kinds of research methodology – empirical and normative. Second, the normative aspect of Floyd's research can be seen in two crucial parts of his research: his reliance on the value of autonomy, and the prescriptive goal of his entire research – to point to a desirable regime. Third, nothing in our exploration here means that Floyd's argument

does not succeed. It does mean that as is, it is incomplete. While Floyd's empirical framework is important and innovative, it is unclear if it succeeds – as Floyd is silent regarding the normative aspects in his research. Fourth and last, it is difficult to conceive of a research in normative political theory that can successfully supersede any kind of normative argumentation via the usage of empirical data. The reason is that if a research includes a normative, evaluative part, it needs to rely on some principle of evaluation which cannot be grounded in any kind of descriptive elements about the world. As Hume famously demonstrated, these are simply different enterprises. Note, however, that this point does not bring us back to G.A. Cohen's position, as his substantive view of normative theorizing includes only principles (Cohen 2003, 214), while the view suggested here is better categorized as a hybrid – empirical–normative methodology and position – this category will be next explored.

Why hybrid normative–empirical methodology matters

At this point, it is possible to follow up on our critical discussion regarding the actual methodology of 'pure normative' and 'pure empirical' research. I shall argue that in actuality, meaning here the actual research conducted (*not* what scholars say about their research), the most common category of research methods in normative political theory, is that of hybrid normative–empirical research. That is, such studies use both normative and empirical statements and methods, albeit at times in an under-developed manner. However, what is important to our methodological context is that once a given study uses both kinds of statements and methods, empirical and normative, it must adopt the research conventions and standards of normative and empirical research, to avoid incomplete or even flawed design and structure.³²

In this hybrid category, a given scholar would have to adopt a dual-methodological approach, which would include methods from empirical social and political science and from normative political theory. This 'dualistic' conclusion avoids an unjustified narrow view of the methodology, methods and research design of research in normative political theory, such as suggested by the 'pure normative' and 'pure empirical' categories.

This general dual-methodological statement requires some elaboration, as follows.

First, the explanation of why hybrid normative–empirical research would require a dualistic approach to methodology is simple. Given the noted demarcation principle suggested above, the evaluative aspect of such research would require methods adequate for evaluation. This would include any method that would enable a given scholar to choose standards of evaluations and to compare them to a given political reality. This is at times done via an analogy, hypothetical examples, thought experiments and many other methods. The empirical side of the demarcation line would require methods of empirical social sciences, both qualitative and quantitative, such as statistical analysis, small N comparison, natural experiments, interviews and many others aimed at reaching a proper understanding of some political phenomenon. If the conclusions reached regarding the actual methodology of the 'pure normative' and 'pure empirical' categories are correct; that is, that in both these categories, the actual research conducted relies on both kinds of methodologies (normative and empirical), studies in normative political theory, as a whole, would have to include both kinds of research strategies, hence – dualistic methodology. Importantly, how is this to be done, in some sense of

research design is beyond the contours of the current article, but will have to win a systematic elaboration elsewhere (see Floyd 2019; Perez 2024).

Second, if the first point is valid, studies in normative political theory cannot ignore the implications of ‘dual methodology’ being the dominant approach. Attempting to ignore one side of what was termed above methodological dualism, as exemplified by the studies by McDermott and Floyd, will result in studies that cannot substantiate their own central claims. Our reading suggests that the category of ‘pure empirical’ simply cannot avoid a normative step in its theorizing; while it did not demonstrate that the ‘pure normative’ category is in principle impossible, it did show that it is very challenging to apply in a consistent manner. Indeed, The decision which research methods and kinds of arguments are adequate in a given study are derivable from the research question selected by the scholar. Whether multicultural policies bring about reduction in welfare policies requires quite a lot of empirical research; whether open borders are desirable given libertarian premises (say), require more of a conceptual analysis. What is important to the article’s methodological interests is the following: *if* a given scholar integrates within her/his normative theory empirical statements (descriptive or causal) that are constitutive to the argument being made, these statements need to be substantiated in some way; or if relevant research is not available, this needs to be indicated. What is important to avoid is a scenario in which empirical statements, central to the given study, will be indicated in an implicit or simply under-studied fashion. As a generalization, most studies in political theory will typically include both sides of the demarcation line, and failure to methodologically treat both sides will simply result in incomplete or even flawed research.

Conclusion

This article attempted to achieve two goals: a descriptive-analytical goal, and what can be termed a critical methodological goal. In the descriptive-analytical part, it suggests that normative political theory has a core evaluative aspect and suggested a demarcation principle or line: for a study to count as normative political theory *it must include a core evaluative step, assessing the desirability (or lack thereof) of some political, social, legal or economic state of affairs*. This demarcation line is suggested to differentiate between empirical political science and normative political theory. This demarcation also assisted in differentiating between different approaches to the study of normative political theory: ‘pure normative’, ‘hybrid normative-empirical’ and ‘pure empirical’.

In the critical methodological part, it was argued that common research in normative political theory uses both sides of the demarcation principle, that is, it utilizes both empirical statements and normative evaluative ones; and that this conclusion holds even for self-proclaimed ‘pure empirical’ studies, and for most ‘pure normative’ studies in normative political theory. This aspect has an explicit critical–methodological part, and that is that studies ignoring this ‘dual-methodological’ nature of normative political theory, will simply be unable to substantiate parts of their central arguments, resulting in incomplete or even flawed research. Normative political theory as can be expected from a normative discipline that is focused on the political world, has typically one ‘leg’ in each side of the suggested demarcation principle, and that structure of normative political theory requires significant methodological awareness, that cannot be ignored without severe consequences for the veracity and reliability of the field’s research.

Notes

1. As he writes: 'I argue that a principle can respond to (i.e. be grounded in) a fact only because it is also a response to a more ultimate principle that is not a response to a fact: accordingly, if principles respond to facts, then the principles at the summit of our conviction are grounded in no facts whatsoever' (Cohen 2008, 229).
2. Indicating a demarcation line does not mean that normative political theory and political science are distinct disciplines, although there are differences in goals and in methods. Both have at the very least a joined topic, which is the political (political institutions, political behavior and so on – parliaments, courts, the government, bureaucracy, voting, strikes, jury duties, wars and conflicts and so on). Furthermore, as argued in the article, political theory uses descriptive and causal elements, which further brings political theory and political science together.
3. This definition owes to Scanlon's approach, as follows: 'The essays collected here are concerned with the standards by which political, legal, and economic institutions should be assessed' (Scanlon 2003, 1); and see the second section for elaboration; see also List and Valentini (2016).
4. The focus of the current article is normative political theory, which contains an explicit evaluative step; in the history of political thought, such a step is not always present, and these studies and the function of political science within them will have to be analysed differently; on the methods of the history of political thought, see Skinner (1969), Blau (2015, 2021), Bosworth and Dowding (2019).
5. Defining the term methodology is not a facile task; Gerring defines it as: 'The tasks, strategies and criteria governing scientific inquiry, including all facets of the research enterprise' (Gerring 2012, 6). Following, it can be defined as the 'tasks, strategies and criteria governing the inquiry of normative political theory'. It is therefore a set of standards and procedures, not any single technique.
6. Gerring defines a method as a 'specific procedure for gathering and/or analysing data' (Gerring 2012, 6). Following, it can be defined as a 'specific procedure within an inquiry in normative political theory'; this can include many and different procedures such as data collection, a hypothetical example, a thought experiment and so on.
7. Political theorists have used a large variety of methods and data in their studies, at times relying on the scholarship of other scholars in political science and other disciplines, and it is important that this plurality will be reflected in the text above, as 'empirical political science' is at times understood as 'quantitative work' and it is crucial that this is not the case at hand, see Turner (2024) and Perez (2024).
8. As defined by King et al., 'Data are systematically collected elements of information about the world. They can be qualitative or quantitative in style' (1994, 23).
9. See Perez (2020) for a typology; see also Beitz (1989: 108) and Baderin (2021).
10. This means that studies such as by G.A. Cohen will be excluded (Cohen 2008); an interesting issue is how to classify utilitarian arguments, in which the principle seems to be fact insensitive, but it is impossible to calculate the correctness of an act or rule without the empirics of the social, political and psychological world in which we reside. This is a complicated issue that will have to wait for another occasion (see Lyons 1965).
11. As exemplified by Waldron (2016), Hamlin (2017), Floyd (2017), Carens (2004), Modood and Thompson (2018), Lægaard, (2015), Perez and Fox (2018), Miller (2013), Baderin (2021), Maynard (2022), Perez (2020), Nefdt (2021). The work of Walzer (1983) merits a mention here, as well as work in deliberative democracy research, see Dryzek et al. (2019).
12. The 'real-world presupposition' is a methodological feature of Carens' work in which analysis begins with political institutions as they are at present.
13. See also Baderin (2014), Anderson (2010), Perez (2020, 2023).
14. In this context, Gerring and Yesnowitz (2006) argue that political science studies contain a normative core. However, for a study to be classified as a 'normative political theory' study, the evaluative step must be at the centre of the study, not merely peripheral or 'hidden'.

15. A word about the terms used in the definition suggested: *normative* as understood here means setting a standard; *evaluation* means the act of comparing X to this standard. While the two are close, they are not identical. Put differently: *normative* describes something that pertains to or involves a standard or norm. *evaluation* refers to the process or act of judging or assessing whether (in the political theory case) a given political institution functions according to some standard. I follow here, *mutatis mutandis*, the definitions of these terms at the Cambridge English dictionary. See <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/normative> (normative); <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/evaluative> (evaluative).
16. This is of course an attribute of many studies in contemporary political theory; when Dworkin writes: 'This form of liberalism insists that government must treat people as equals' (1985, 205), he indicates a certain evaluative principle; Rawls writes: 'a characteristic set of principles for assigning basic rights and duties and for determining what they take to be the proper distribution of the benefits and burdens of social cooperation' (1999, 5). In our context Rawls' 'assigning' is yet another example of an evaluative principle.
17. Susan Okin makes a very similar step when she writes: 'There are a multitude of feminisms ... means the beliefs that women should not be disadvantaged by their sex, that they should be recognized as having human dignity equally with men ...' (1998, 661), and Okin continues: 'I want to argue, instead, that there is considerable likelihood of conflict between feminism and group rights for minority cultures ...' (Okin 1998, 664). From a methodological perspective, Okin is describing a social-political situation (certain group rights), compares it to a standard (feminism) and finds the existing situation lacking.
18. While there is a connection between methodological inquiries and techniques and the larger issues regarding the nature of the discipline, these larger issues are not required for each methodological advancement, as can be seen in many methodological discussions in political science; for a key 'wider' discussion in political philosophy, see Floyd (2019).
19. It is not claimed here that McDermott wrote his methodological article aiming to be loyal to his indicated methodological views in all of his substantive-normative articles. I do aim to demonstrate, that even a self-proclaimed 'pure normative' scholar cannot follow this strict methodology.
20. McDermott's framework is Lockean, hence there are rights in pre-state situations, see McDermott (1999).
21. McDermott utilizes several different argumentative techniques, including classifying acts into Hohfeld's typology, using assumptions about fairness (justifying the duty to punish as a justified treatment of the unfairness conducted by criminals, p. 155), relying on previous research regarding consent and others, see especially, pp. 152–156.
22. Even if this argument succeeds, the resulting state would be minimal, limited to few acts connected to punishment. This is interesting as this minimal quasi-state would be the evaluative standard with which to evaluate current, real-life institutions, which would mean that many functions of contemporary countries would be illegitimate according to McDermott's framework.
23. In an article dedicated to a similar topic, T. Fisher argued the exact opposite; that multiple legal agencies (what she calls 'polycentric legal regimes') would be more efficient than a centralized one (2010).
24. McDermott employs several methods of argumentation, as described in f.n. 21 above; the point here is not to discount them, rather to clarify that his substantive approach requires also empirical substantiation; there is no recognized classification of argumentative methods in political theory, but see Floyd (2019) and Dennett (2013).
25. Without reflective equilibrium it is unclear if the two principles of justice will remain as is, as citizens' 'considered convictions' corroborate the results of the thought experiment of the veil of ignorance; the overlapping consensus is required as a way to demonstrate that the Rawlsian principles of justice can be supported by different groups in a stable way, a key aspect of Rawls' ideas in '*Political Liberalism*' (1993).

26. This point leaves open the question of what is the usage that political theorists make of empirical statements, causal mechanisms, and other empirical pieces of data. See Perez (2020) for a typology.
27. See Easton (1951, 39).
28. As normative behaviourism has a central normative, evaluative function, it fits within our definition of normative political theory.
29. Floyd's patterns must meet certain criteria, such as certainty in the quality of data, ranking of values and others, see Perez (2022).
30. On the connection between revealed preferences and autonomy, see Sen (1973, 253). In a recent article, Floyd, in an interesting comment, does indicate some normative grounding to his approach, but does not develop it in a way that would answer the critique indicated above (Floyd 2023, and see the critique by Erman and Moller 2023).
31. Floyd of course suggests reasons following which he argues that data regarding crime and insurrections should be preferred over what he calls 'mentalism', mainly because these preferences enable a decisive response as to what individuals wish to have as the regime that will have authority over them. However, as far as I can see, he does not suggest a detailed explanation of why revealed preferences are central to his argumentation, aside from a brief acknowledgment at his 2023 piece (see Floyd 2023, 492, 499).
32. See, for example, the collaborative work of political theorists with political scientists that methodologically grounds hybrid research (Barnes and Baderin 2020; Perez and Fox 2018; Spinner Halev and Theiss-Morse 2003).

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