Posing a Dilemma for Dilemmas: Where do they come from and why do they matter?¹

Abstract

This paper explores the concept of ‘dilemma’ as it has been developed in the work of Mark Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes’ work in interpretive political studies. This paper does not critique the premise of the concept, but rather seeks to supplement theories around dilemmas with the concept of ‘problematisation’. In order to do so, this paper begins with a brief review of the concept of ‘dilemma’ and how it has been applied empirically. Then, in the second section, the paper summarises the emergence of ‘problematisations’ in Michel Foucault’s work, and specifically how this concept is related to questions about political change. There is a substantial degree of synergy between ‘dilemma’ and ‘problematisation’ in the sense that both concepts seek to explain political change by identifying a discrepancy between two or more beliefs, practices and/or traditions. However, while a ‘dilemma’ ostensibly implies an intractable tension between those beliefs, a ‘problematisation’ implies a solution by identifying the key elements of the problem at play, and in doing so, also sets the framework through which a dilemma can be resolved. The central argument of this paper, therefore, is to suggest that we must analyse political phenomena through the prism of problematisations to fully grasp the contest between different beliefs, practices and traditions.

Key words: interpretivism, interpretive political studies, dilemma, problematisation, political change, contestation

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The interpretive approach has made a significant impact on the study of British politics, especially since the publication of Mark Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes’ seminal study, *Interpreting British Governance*. This book, and their subsequent work, has made a distinctive and valuable contribution to our understanding of British governance, with repercussions for the discipline of politics more widely. Their influence has spawned research by other academics, whether that is on community leadership or crisis management. While this approach has been well-received, it has its critics. Some have criticised the concept of tradition and its relationship to structure-agency debates. Others have criticised the epistemological foundations. Some more are sceptical of Bevir and Rhodes’ use of the concept of power. But, perhaps most damningly of all, Martin Smith suggests that the approach does not tell us anything that we did not already know. Of course, Bevir and Rhodes have responded to

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these criticisms in their own ways. Moreover, the continuing relevance of the approach to the study of British politics (indeed, its growing relevance) implies that the approach is not only resilient but also a valuable addition in our armoury to study political phenomena.

This paper does not challenge interpretive political studies (IPS). Rather, it makes the case that the approach should be supplemented with a more comprehensive articulation of the concept of ‘dilemma’. It seems curious that this concept has not received widespread attention from other scholars, even though most other aspects of the approach have been dissected and evaluated. This means that, whilst concepts such as ‘tradition’ have become more robust and refined through ongoing debates, the concept of dilemma has remained unchanged and, moreover, unchallenged. This paper does not condemn the concept or even argue that it has been wrongly applied, but rather that we can build on it and expand the research possibilities open to us as interpretive scholars. In this way, this paper explores the strengths and weaknesses of the concept of dilemma and asks how it can be improved. In order to do so, this paper is divided into two broad sections, with numerous subsections. The first section reviews the application of the concept in three empirical studies published by Bevir and Rhodes, namely: Interpreting British Governance (2003), Governance Stories (2006) and (single-authored by Rhodes) Everyday Life in British Government (2011). This draws out how the concept is used in these three empirical studies, and in particular shows that dilemmas, while part of the analysis, are not a prism through which political issues are analysed. The second section looks at the relationship of dilemmas to ‘problematisations’. This latter concept has received growing attention. This concept is able to supplement Bevir’s original conceptualisation of dilemma using the work of Michel Foucault (and other associated post-structuralist authors) on problematisations. This is an opportunity to rebuke other criticisms levelled at IPS – that it cannot explain rapid political change, that it does not have a theory of power, and that it cannot adjudicate between competing traditions. This paper seeks to supplement our understanding of dilemmas through problematisations, which would place contingency and competing interpretations of problems in a central position to explain political change.

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In brief, the core argument seeks to provoke a debate about dilemmas, arguing that the concept deserves more attention. This is not a critique of Bevir and Rhodes, or the interpretive approach. On the contrary, this paper complements the approach by offering a broader horizon of research possibilities. Ultimately, it makes the case that interpretive scholars can analyse political phenomena through the prism of ‘dilemma’ or ‘problematisations’. This is novel because it makes a link between two pools of research that have, as yet, not been connected. In offering a broader scholarly agenda than before, this paper seeks to offer a significant – although at the moment very much implied – shift of attention. With this in mind, it’s time to turn to the interpretive approach as it currently stands.

I. Interpreting Dilemmas

This section briefly identifies the central tenets of the interpretive approach.\(^{12}\) It will not be an extensive review, as these already exist.\(^{13}\) It is important to note that IPS is not a set of methodological techniques, but offers a philosophical outlook on the world from ontological and epistemological principles. The central contention of IPS is that ideas matter and that only actors’ interpretations can fully explain their actions. This promotes a ‘decentred’ study of British politics, which Mark Bevir and David Richards define in the following way:

> To decentre is to focus on the social construction of a practice through the ability of individuals to create and act on meanings. It is to unpack a practice in terms of the disparate and contingent beliefs and actions of individuals. A decentred governance approach involves challenging the idea that inexorable, impersonal forces are driving a shift from hierarchies to networks. Instead, it suggests that networks are constructed differently by many actors against the background of diverse traditions.\(^{14}\)

In order to do this, IPS relies on a set of key concepts (summarised in Table 1). Using their preferred language, it seeks to reveal the way in which traditions are created and modified through

\(^{12}\) Please note that this paper specifically address the interpretive framework developed by Mark Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes. For an overview of the burgeoning literature on interpretive approaches in the social sciences (and beyond), see: H. Wagenaar (2011) *Meaning in Action: Interpretation and dialogue in policy analysis*, Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe.

\(^{13}\) For example, see this symposium: A. Finlayson *et. al.* (2004) ‘The Interpretive Approach in Political Science: A symposium’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 6:2, pp.129-64.

individually-held beliefs and social practices of situated agents. The roots of this philosophy comes from Mark Bevir’s hallmark book, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, which promotes an anti-foundational epistemology. It is here that we come across dilemmas for the first time. Bevir argues that, “[p]eople develop, adjust, and transform traditions in response to dilemmas, where dilemmas are authoritative understandings that put into question their existing webs of belief. Dilemmas prompt changes of belief because they consist of new beliefs and any new belief necessarily poses a question of the agent’s webs of beliefs.” Crucially, dilemmas are open to (indeed, dependent upon) interpretation, and this means that they are not reducible to specific types of phenomena. A typology, model or classification system is impossible. Rather, to be conceived as a dilemma, they need to be identified and interpreted as an authoritative belief that contradicts presently-held beliefs. In this way, any experience or belief may (but does not have to) lead to a dilemma.

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15 Based on a range of publications by M. Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes – for a full list, see bibliography.


What is the relationship of this to other concepts? Bevir argues that traditions can only ever act as a guide to help individuals respond to dilemmas; they can never be all-encompassing rules because that would remove the sense of agency that actors have. Indeed, the capacity for agency means that individuals can – and do – react to dilemmas in novel and creative ways. This suggests that individual beliefs may be amended in response to a dilemma, or even discarded completely in favour of a new belief introduced as a result of an unfolding dilemma. Bevir argues that it is not possible to be more specific about this process. Consequently, dilemmas are fluid, indeterminate, fluctuating, and usually creative responses to traditions and beliefs. What does this mean in practice? To answer this question, I have taken three key texts of empirical analysis using IPS: *Interpreting British Governance*, *Governance Stories*, and *Everyday Life in British Government*.

*Interpreting British Governance*

In their 2003 study, the authors describe a dilemma in the following terms: ‘A dilemma arises for an individual or institution when a new idea stands in opposition to existing beliefs or practices and so forces a reconsideration of these existing beliefs and associated traditions’.18 This is fairly similar to the definition given by Bevir in 1999, and their explanation also bears significant similarities. It would be somewhat surprising (if not alarming) if things had already changed. The authors cite numerous dilemmas throughout this study, such as responses to new public management (NPM) and Thatcherism, which were themselves responses to the perceived problems of government overload that exacerbated inflation through excessive public spending. The book also looks at how traditions have interpreted Thatcherism, and responded to the dilemmas it posed.

The central case study of a dilemma surrounds the response of the ‘socialist tradition’ to Thatcherism and the unintended consequences of NPM-inspired reforms during the 1980s. In particular, the authors note that the Labour Party accepted the idea of controlling inflation as a policy goal and accepted the existence of an underclass. Consequently, New Labour began to break with many of the policies associated with the Keynesian welfare state. However, those new beliefs were incorporated into the socialist tradition through the ‘third way’. This meant that market outcomes should be in the interests of ordinary working people, and that government should intervene to respond to social as well as economic adversity, espousing traditional elements of communitarianism.19 With regards to

18 Bevir and Rhodes, *Interpreting British Governance*, p.36.
19 Ibid., pp.126-8.
governance reforms, New Labour emphasised ‘joined-up government’ in response to the dilemma of increasingly fragmented public service delivery.

Whilst this description is an accurate reflection of the changes that occurred in the 1970s to the 2000s, it remains a description. Why did New Labour respond to these specific beliefs and not others? Why did fiscal policy and the concept of an underclass spark changes to the socialist tradition, but other beliefs, such as communitarian values, remained unchallenged? These are ultimately questions about not only the impact of different beliefs or traditions, but also the interaction between them. Bevir and Rhodes describe two or more traditions in parallel to one another, not seemingly in conflict with one another. This makes it difficult to explain why one traditions or set of beliefs has, causally, a greater influence on governance practices than another. Both of these criticisms suggest that the concept is static in the sense that it describes a link from one set of beliefs to another, not the interactive (and ultimately conflictual) process involved nor why it happened in the way that it did.

_Governance Stories_

This second book was published three years after _Interpreting British Governance_. It deals with a number of criticism of the initial publication. For example, they respond to criticism over practices and actions, the role of power and structure, methodological questions, and others. Dilemmas, however, remain unchanged. The definition remains the same (almost word-for-word): ‘A dilemma arises for an individual or group when a new idea stands in opposition to existing beliefs or practices and so forces a reconsideration of the existing beliefs and associated tradition’. 20

If New Labour was the case study example of an unfolding dilemma in _Interpreting British Governance_, then the National Health Service (NHS) is the case study in _Governance Stories_. It is this institution where we receive the most detailed discussion of a dilemma, between the beliefs of doctors, who emphasise medical autonomy, and the beliefs of managers, who emphasise financial and corporate management. Bevir and Rhodes argue that there were unresolved tensions between these two groups in addition to broader differences over universalism and selectivity, both of which were exacerbated by the tension between rationalising limited resources in a context of potentially unlimited demand. These tensions came to the fore in the 1970s, when government overload was

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interpreted as a problem for the state. Selectivity became preferred, corporate governance was emphasised and resources were limited.  

Compared to their 2003 study, Bevir and Rhodes explore the key dilemmas in the NHS far more thoroughly, and it is possible to see the conflict between two different ideas around the concept of autonomy that was missing previously. However, and although Bevir and Rhodes tell us that the dilemma’s seeds were planted in the original NHS Act of 1948, we are still left wondering why it was autonomy and financial prudence that came to epitomise the issues in state healthcare provision. Furthermore, although we know that the dilemma was resolved (to an extent, at least) we are left unclear as to why the NHS was reformed in one particular way rather than another. As with Interpreting British Governance, then, we are still attempting to grasp with the ‘why’ question.

*Everyday Life in British Government*

R.A.W. Rhodes’ application of IPS to the everyday life of the British political elite is a unique window of opportunity, which is extremely unlikely to resurface again anytime soon given his high level of access. Due to its empirical nature, it (rightly) emphasises Rhodes’ observations, rather than the theories that underpin it (especially given the plethora of published material on IPS already available by this point). Nonetheless, Rhodes still defines the key concepts, including dilemma, in the following way (unchanged as ever): ‘A dilemma arises for an individual or institution when a new idea stands in opposition to existing beliefs or practices and forces a reconsideration of these existing beliefs and associated traditions’, adding, ‘[t]o accept a new belief is to pose a dilemma that asks questions of existing traditions’.  

Dilemmas are mentioned often, but there are three dilemmas that confront ministerial departments in particular, which has forced actors to adjudicate between: first, Westminster roles and managerialism; second, the constitutional bureaucracy and political responsiveness; and, third, traditional departmental philosophies and neo-liberal policy agendas. These three tensions are present throughout the book and Rhodes effectively discusses each of these issues. He also relates them back to the three traditions (Westminster, managerial, network governance). However, it is also noticeable

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21 Bevir and Rhodes, *Governance Stories*, pp.127-44.
that the concept is not central to his political analysis; they are not the prism through which his analysis takes place. The concept is usually mentioned only in the introduction and conclusion of a chapter. This is a problem throughout the study, which means that we are given only a synchronic snapshot of how dilemmas have affected everyday life in Westminster (no matter how fascinating those insights might be!). That said, there is one clear diachronic case study example of a dilemma as it unfolds, namely the resignation of Estelle Morris, Secretary of State for Education between 2001 and 2002. This narrative is one in which a dilemma emerges and develops, with competing interpretations of ministerial competence that ultimately led to the resignations of both Morris and the Chair of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). Ostensibly for the first time, a case study reaches a level of depth to fully grasp an unfolding crisis. It shows the ripple effects of a crisis, and how established practices were disrupted to deal with it. It is the first time that we are able to identify how a dilemma emerged, how key actors interpreted it, and the repercussions of it. However, it is arguably an isolated case which was not taken further.

A Dilemma for Dilemmas?

The interpretive approach offers the scholarship on political studies distinctive ways of looking at the way in which ideas affect politics by centralising the importance of interpreting ideas and beliefs as causal mechanisms in political analysis. The previous three subsections do not seek to challenge this point. However, they have described a concept in need of development. This requires us to examine the concept of dilemma in more depth than before. ‘Dilemma’ is very simple, effectively plugging into the rest of the interpretive framework. But this simplicity has also made the concept ambiguous and left aspects of it vague. We know remarkably little about the process of how a dilemma unfolds, how it is interpreted, negotiated and then ‘resolved’. It is no mistake that, at the end of each review above, a central question remains: ‘why?’. Bevir has offered persuasive reasons that we cannot go into more detail about dilemmas because this would compromise the central tenet of IPS: interpretation. However, in taking this view, it means that the interpretive approach cannot go beyond describing what happened. It cannot explain why one course of action was taken over another. It cannot answer the following questions:

- Why did a dilemma emerge in the way that it did?

24 For example, see Chapter 7 in the book, pp.166-209.
25 Ibid., pp.244-79.
- Why did it develop in the way that it did?
- Why was it resolved in the way that it was?
- What are the repercussions of these interpretations?

The above questions attempt to refocus the analysis. In asking these basic questions about dilemmas, it becomes clear that the causal link between sets of beliefs is still in question. Do dilemmas arise as a result of anything more than chance or luck? If we cannot fully conceive why a dilemma emerges (other than ‘because an actor interpreted it like that’), then it would seem that dilemmas are arbitrary processes and devoid of any explanatory or analytical power. Smith’s critique, mentioned in the introduction, retains its force: does IPS tell us anything that we did not already know? This suggests that we need to develop a more coherent understanding of dilemmas than simply as a link between one set of beliefs to another, which is arguably what Bevir and Rhodes have done when they talk of a shift from hierarchies to networks or from rowing to steering. This crystallises a tension between the simplicity of the concept and a detailed understanding of the process of dealing with dilemmas as they emerge and develop. None of this is to say that Bevir and Rhodes (or any other interpretive scholars, for that matter) have applied the concept wrongly. For them, dilemmas have arguably not been central to their research in the sense that their research questions were about traditions and beliefs, not dilemmas or the process of change. That said, I would like to propose that we can elevate dilemmas and analyse political issues through the prism of this concept, which offers us a unique opportunity to expand the interpretive research agenda.27

Ultimately, how we treat dilemmas has consequences for IPS more widely. The ambiguous nature of it means that Bevir and Rhodes can be criticised with the deceptively simple question posed by Jason Glynos and David Howarth: ‘why might some aspects of traditions exert greater appeal than others, or why might some aspects resist modification?’.28 This question was posed with reference to a debate over the role of power in the interpretive framework. Elsewhere, Hendrik Wagenaar criticises Bevir and Rhodes empirical work because it is nothing more than a ‘sophisticated institutional analysis that includes beliefs and values’.29 This latter critique is, perhaps, a step too far. However,

27 For instance, the of the following two empirical studies, only one mentions the term ‘dilemma’, and does so in passing, while the other study does not mention the term once throughout the article: Wilkinson, ‘Organised Chaos’; Sullivan, ‘Interpreting ‘Community Leadership’.
29 Wagenaar, Meaning in Action, p.4.
the root cause of both arguably lies in how we conceive of dilemmas. The following section offers an answer to the first criticism and a rebuke to the second.

II. Problematisations

To reiterate, this paper does not critique the nature of the interpretive approach, or even the basic premise of dilemmas. Rather, the problem we ostensibly face regards the application and articulation of this concept to political issues and its possible wider significance to the interpretive scholarship. As Colin Hay has pointed out, the concept is ‘used to refer to little more than the simple juxtaposition, combination and recombination of ideas and insights drawn from the different traditions to which a political actor is exposed’, which essentially means that dilemmas offer nothing ‘new’.\textsuperscript{30} He goes on to argue that we must look to extra-discursive dimensions, such as governance failures, to explain political change. Indeed, he proposes that Bevir and Rhodes have done this themselves. There is a danger that this could potentially compromise a central tenet of IPS (interpretation). Whilst dilemmas are underdeveloped as an analytical resource, we do not necessarily need to posit the roots of political change to ‘extra-discursive’ factors or ‘institutional pathologies’ alone. Rather, the concept of ‘problematisation’ offers an opportunity to develop dilemmas both in keeping with IPS’ epistemological principles whilst simultaneously offering greater depth to the analysis of dilemmas or problems. To demonstrate this, this section will briefly explore this concept with reference to the work of Michel Foucault, before moving on to look at its relationship to dilemmas. This section will then explain how this relationship can make a substantive contribution to our understanding of political change within an interpretive framework.

Interpreting Problematisations

Gilles Deleuze argues that: ‘an organism is nothing if not the solution to a problem, as are each of its differenciated [sic] organs, such as the eye which solves a light “problem”’.\textsuperscript{31} For Deleuze, it is this dynamic between problems and their answers that offers a key to how we understand the world around us. In this way, narratives and stories are ‘answers’ to ‘problems’ that the reader must

\textsuperscript{30} Hay, ‘Interpreting Interpretivism’, p.179.

identify and interpret. This association between narratives and their problems/answers is an interesting link, especially given the emphasis previously ascribed to narrative analysis in IPS by Bevir and Rhodes. In taking this link seriously, it follows that problems are pivotal as an organising perspective – not only for the narratives which we, as authors, seek to tell – but also the narratives which situated actors themselves attempt to explain. Indeed, this is one of the many reasons that semi-structured interviews with elites are such an important methodological tool for scholars. Political agents, in explaining their answers to our questions, are often attempting to tell their version of events or their story because, as Andrew Rawnsley points out, they are desperate for it to make sense. This ‘making sense’ or justification of decision-making suggests that agents constantly face problems or puzzles, which is true of policy-makers by definition. Very often, this means that ‘problems’ are not a link from one belief to another by the framework through which political issues are discussed and adjudicated. It is in this setting that we must place the concept of ‘problematisation’, which has been an attempt by a growing set of scholars to offer a more coherent understanding of the puzzles and dilemmas that policy-makers face, and also their effects on policy outcomes. In order to understand this in more detail, I will explore the concept of ‘problematisation’ with specific reference to one of its most important authors, Michel Foucault.

Foucault’s conceptualisation of the term ‘problematisation’ is fragmented in the sense that he does not have a single, coherent reference point for this idea. Rather, there are multiple explanations across different articles, interviews and monographs. Irrespective of this, problematisations were an essential methodological tool for Foucault because it offered a lens through which he could construct ‘regimes of truth’ or realms in which truth and false were articulated. This means that problematisations are more than simple processes of identifying and resolving specific technical problems, but broadly about the interplay of power and knowledge, and about making sense of the

world. The point of his analysis is less about identifying true or false statements but understanding how different types of truth were made possible. One vehicle to understand this is ‘problematisation’, which questioned the nature of truth regimes. It is possible to identify two different definitions of problematisation: first, it can (as above) describe Foucault’s method, such as problematising sexuality, insanity or penal reform; or, second, it can refer to the development of questions, or the ‘transformation of a group of obstacles and difficulties into problems to which […] diverse solutions will attempt to produce a response’ by actors themselves. Ultimately, both definitions describe the same process but from two different points of view (the first from the author, the second from a situated agent). It indicates that a problematisation is the process of making a problem out of otherwise unquestioned practices. It is to put into question our taken-for-granted truths. In *Madness and Civilization* (1967), for example, Foucault wanted to problematise our views of (amongst other things) mental illness to demonstrate the extent to which our views of it were an historical product. This is the point of view from the author. From the point of view of medical practitioners at the time, they put into question their current knowledge of ‘madness’ and regarded it as insufficient to deal with the medical advances and so doctors and scientists began to treat it as ‘mental illness’. In this sense, it would be possible to shift the boundaries of established truth regimes and, by extension, everyday practices.

Analytically, Foucault focused on ‘practical texts’ to demonstrate these changes. He consulted hospital registers, protocols and regulations, and other prescriptive texts, which imposed rules to offer a framework of everyday conduct. This indicates that problematisations ‘emerge’ or ‘arise’ through practices. With regard to his work on prisons, Foucault notes that:

> the target of analysis wasn’t “institutions”, “theories”, or “ideology” but *practices* - with the aim of grasping the conditions that make these acceptable at a given moment; the hypothesis being that these types of practice are not just governed by institutions, prescribed by ideologies, guided by pragmatic circumstances - whatever role these elements may actually play - but, up to a point, possess their own specific regularities, logic, strategy, self-evidence, and “reason”. It is a question of analyzing a “regime of practices” - practices being understood here as places where what is said and what is done, rules imposed and reasons given, the planned and the taken-for-granted meet and interconnect.

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This is a key quote, which crystallises Foucault’s analytical lens and adds greater depth to the concept of problematisation. It argues that practices are conditioned to be acceptable, and that everyday practices sustain them as a ‘regime of practices’. In posing questions and problems, by facing obstacles and failure, this ‘regime’ changes:

If prisons and punitive mechanisms are transformed, it won’t be because a plan of reform has found its way into the heads of the social workers; it will be when those who have a stake in that reality, all those people, have come into collision with each other and with themselves, run into dead ends, problems, and impossibilities, been through conflicts and confrontations - when critique has been played out in the real, not when reformers have realized their ideas.43

The crucial point here is that this quotation centralises the importance of everyday life (‘those who have a stake in that reality’) and everyday practices. Social order is sustained through these practices to form a regime of truth. This suggests, in keeping with anti-foundationalist philosophy, that knowledge of the world is provisional and order is only ever the appearance of order through social negotiation, through ritual, through everyday protocols.44 Therefore, ‘regimes of truth’ sustain particular views of social spaces and relationships between people. They explain how society should be ordered by naturalising what are ultimately arbitrary relationships, processes and practices. A problematisation destabilises social order, questioning sedimented social practices and making explicit the contingent, provisional nature of everyday life. As mentioned previously, Foucault was interested in how true and false were ‘divided up’ and how different ways of conceiving the relationships between true and false were possible. This is not about establishing whether or not something was in fact ‘true’, but rather how truth was regulated through the production of rules.45 A problematisation disrupts this order by transgressing these established rules and ‘truths’. In one sense, this would imply that problematisations can be wide-ranging questions; asking ‘the bigger questions’ of philosophy, such as ‘who are we?’ and ‘how did we get here?’.46 However, more often, they are also specific events. They frame the political contest that ensues when depoliticised practices become contested. This is because a problematisation asks particular questions about established boundaries

and in so doing, it breaks down some barriers whilst simultaneously constructing new ones. It limits what is an acceptable, legitimate and even imaginable question to ask. Consequently, problematisations not only point to possible solutions to a set of difficulties, but also develop the very conditions within which possible responses can be given. Therefore, they define the elements that constitute the solution of a problem by virtue of defining a problem in a given way. This is extremely important because it suggests that simply identifying the problem in a particular way has consequences for finding the solution, giving an answer and even in making policy recommendations. This is why the epigraph from Karl Marx at the head of this paper is most illustrative. As we know, the way situated agents conceive of their situation comes to define their actions; so, similarly, the way we define our problems through our questions come to constitute our answers.

The above has focused very much on the ‘knowledge’ aspect of problematisations (i.e., to pose a problem is to ask questions about what we know). However, anyone familiar with Foucault’s work must be aware of the link between knowledge, truth and power. To pose a problem is also to ask questions about power. Power, although almost always associated with politics, is clearly a convoluted and contested concept itself, which makes a short summary of its role quite challenging. Notwithstanding such problems, if politics is presented as a contingent set of practices – as the above has advanced – then it suggests that power must be seen in terms of a strategic relationship that engages with political contests. Power has the ability to sharpen, blur, strengthen, weaken and link policies and arguments together. Power is the force that mediates a rupture of contesting practices and traditions. Peter Triantafillou summarises Foucault’s approach to argue that power is, ‘a label for a set of comprehensive set of strategic practices or techniques’. This means that the issue of power is not so much about ‘what’ – although undoubtedly important – and more about ‘how’. Although somewhat complex, this understanding of power elevates the role of individuals or groups, or as Foucault puts it:

if we speak of the power of laws, institutions, and ideologies, if we speak of structures or mechanisms of power, it is only insofar as we suppose that certain persons exercise power over others. The term “power” designates relationships between “partners”.

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49 Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power’, p.337.
Power is therefore relational and fluid, and varies considerably between individuals depending on their deployment of an ‘ensemble of actions’. This implies that power is instituted in everyday practices, and played out through symbolic means. Foucault extends his argument by suggesting that power relations ‘are exercised, to an exceedingly important extent, through the production and exchange of signs’. The exercise of power through the production of signs highlights that symbols and rituals play an important role in conceptualisations of the political, which indicates that we must aim our analytical lens to everyday practices and, more widely, traditions. Indeed, this means that power is not necessarily imposed from above but perpetuated by a range of (often conflicting) everyday practices. Most importantly, and rarely acknowledged, the logical conclusion of the importance of symbols and signs is that the individual must also interpret power. It is here that power is relational, and it is here that individuals are able to resist power. Political endeavour, to repeat an earlier point, is therefore about the struggle to decide how society should be ordered, preserved or changed. Thought in this way, ‘society’ has become ‘the product of a series of practices attempting to establish order in a context of contingency’; it is predicated on a construction between ‘us’ and ‘them’, or an interpretation between conflicting ideas, beliefs, or traditions. This means that the relationship between power, knowledge and truth – and its resulting problematisations – is a complex one. The crucial point of this discussion is to demonstrate that politics is not about the resolution of a conflict, the settlement of a dispute, or the (preferably successful) outcome of a policy. Rather, it describes the very process of contestation itself. The ‘resolution’ of a conflict is merely a settled – and contingent – set of social practices (‘regime of practices’) which remain inherently unstable, complex and value-laden. One basic premise for democratic politics is to allow politicians to compete for office through elections because they have contrasting visions for social and political order, which they would seek to implement once elected. Without this conflictual space, whether it is played out in the House of Commons’ parliamentary chamber between Government and Opposition or on the sofas of breakfast news programmes, political action and reaction would be reduced to a lacklustre and technocratic problem-solving (within a dominant ‘regime of truth’).

Alan Finlayson concludes:

50 Ibid., p.338.


52 Indeed, some could even argue that the rise of political apathy in part stems from the fact that mainstream parties are not sufficiently differentiated from one another; that, in fact, there are few genuine contrasting visions for society between politicians. However, this goes far beyond the purview of this paper.
If we begin with a clear and distinct concept of politics as the ‘arena’ within which we see expressed the irreducible and contested plurality of public life, then ineradicable contestation of differing world-views, then it is clear that what is distinct in politics is not the presence of beliefs but the presence of beliefs in contradiction with each other, not decisions about courses of action but of dispute over decisions and courses of action.⁵³

A key to this is the idea of ‘contestation’. Finlayson points us towards an analysis predicated on differences, and the rupture between different values, beliefs, ideas, practices and traditions. A dilemma, or problematisation, provides this rupture. In fact, this is key for social and political change. Beliefs are contested and then negotiated and adjudicated, arguably not ‘through’ dilemmas or power, but through their effects. The unfolding dilemma matters, as does the exercise of power (returning us to the distinction between ‘how’ and ‘what’, or ‘action’ and ‘object’). There is a difference here between ‘dilemma-as-object’ and ‘dilemma-as-process’. Political change occurs through the resulting process of dealing with a dilemma. It is this which inspires action, that poses questions and proposes answers. Indeed, this is arguably something that Bevir and Rhodes have identified in their own conceptualisation of the term. Frequently, they define dilemmas as a process, but all too often (though not always) their analyses treat dilemmas as though they are objects or links between a set of beliefs. With this in mind, it is apt to explore precisely the similarities and differences between dilemmas and problematisations.

From Dilemmas to Problems

The above has identified and explained the concept of problematisation, but it has done so by navigating a complex set of debates about the meaning of social and political reality, briefly examining the concept of power, and indeed even questioning the basis of relations between truth, knowledge and power. This has been important because it demonstrates that there is a rich literature with which IPS can – and should – engage. At this point it is worth discussing precisely how dilemmas and problems interact, and its consequences for interpretive scholars.

From the outset, it is important to note that this discussion is rather nuanced in the sense that both ‘dilemma’ and ‘problematisation’ seek to explain political change by reference to a discrepancy between beliefs, practices and, in some cases, traditions. In that sense, problematisations do not offer a radical departure for interpretive political studies. However, the link between these two concepts

has not been clearly articulated before. Furthermore, problematisations seem more developed than dilemma. It has, for example, a clearer link to the concept of power, which means that the explanatory value of the concept is easier to identify. Whilst dilemma has remained amorphous and even descriptive, a problematisation has the ability to explain the process of political change in more depth by making reference to how some practices or ideas became a problem to individuals and/or groups and how these problems have been negotiated through a contest between conflicting political ideas (by, additionally, heightening the importance of power).

The semantic difference between dilemma and problem is important. A dilemma indicates that there is a contradiction or an unresolved tension between beliefs. A problem goes a step further. Not only does it acknowledge a tension or contradiction, but it also proposes a way to resolve it by identifying key elements of the puzzle in a question. In other words, it has prioritised some ideas or practices, and set boundaries for discussion (whilst simultaneously breaking down others). This marks a significant break from Bevir’s concept, who notes that:

> To confront a dilemma is to ask oneself a question, where the very idea of asking oneself a question presupposes there is no settled answer. Questions are open invitations to a dialogue, not resolutions of a dialogue, so when we ask a question we cannot already have settled on the answer. ⁵⁴

There are two issues here. First, the implication that questions are ‘open invitations’. To an extent, this is true because there are multiple answers to the same question. However, in asking a particular question, we have already established a framework for analysis and boundaries within which we can examine a political issue. In that sense, questions have an agenda-setting purpose. This is the heart of a problematisation, which is also where power has a role to play. Second, questions are considered ‘a dialogue’. This evokes a consensual, exploratory spirit. As pointed out above, a problematisation is a contest between competing interpretations of true and false, with an ostensible ‘winner’ and ‘loser’ – and all that this implies. Again, it is here that power has a role to play. Indeed, it is noticeable that the difference on both occasions between dilemmas and problems is power. Could one take the step of proposing that ‘dilemma + power = problematisation’? If so, this would have at least two repercussions. First, it would mitigate the claim that IPS does not have a theory – or room for – power in its analysis. ⁵⁵ Second, it would imply that a dilemma is an earlier ‘step’ in the process of

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⁵⁴ Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, p.239.

dealing with a tension, and that the next ‘step’ is to problematise this tension. Put another way, it implies that a problematisation is the process by which we deal with dilemmas.

In this vein, we can now return to the questions posed at the end of Section I (see pp.9-10). When asking why dilemmas emerge, we can now point towards the practices of everyday life and the questions that these pose for situated agents. Dilemmas emerge by asking certain questions and by pitting true and false against one another. When asking how dilemmas develop and how they are resolved, we can look towards the agenda that the problematisation has set, the power relations between groups and individuals, and the nature of the conflict between ideas, beliefs and practices. When asking about the repercussions, we must locate the analysis in the broader IPS framework of traditions, practices and beliefs. What question has the problematisation resolved, if at all? This clearly matters. It helps us to understand how situated agents govern themselves, and how they negotiate their social world. It asks questions about how true and false have been divided, without necessarily making a judgement on what is true or false. How we negotiate ‘problems’ tells interpretive scholars a lot – by setting priorities, our values and beliefs; by making decisions, our extent and interpretation of power. Crucially, we can analyse all of this through our pre-existing interpretive framework. Our methodological techniques already focus on everyday practices; it is the prism through which we look at these rituals that must change if and when we wish to explore political change through an interpretive analysis. That is not to say that other scholars have done IPS ‘wrong’. Rather, it can complement the interpretive research agenda by changing emphasis, by asking new questions, by supplementing our analysis of everyday life.

What Next?

This paper began with a complaint that the concept of ‘dilemma’ conceived in the work of Bevir and Rhodes has not been sufficiently explored since the interpretive approach has made inroads to British politics. In doing so, this paper posed a challenge as to why this concept matters. The central aim has been to provoke a debate amongst interpretive scholars about why and how we use this concept. This began with a brief review of Bevir and Rhodes’ previous work using IPS. A question to which we frequently come back to asks ‘why?’, which suggests that, perhaps, Bevir and Rhodes have not been able to provide the causal links between political phenomena and the practices, traditions or beliefs with which they are associated. This is the ‘dilemma’ or problem with which this paper has been
engaged. In thinking about this issue, we can bring together the concept of ‘problematisation’ with ‘dilemma’. This former concept has developed clear links to our understanding of power, knowledge and truth, which this paper has briefly attempted to summarise. The consequences are rather nuanced. Most importantly, we must not treat dilemmas as objects that link one set of beliefs to another. Instead, we must look at them as a process. How do ideas clash with one another? How do traditions compete for dominance? Why do some traditions exert greater causal influence than others? These questions highlight the importance of contestation, but crucially, they also indicate the close relationship between knowledge and power.

Conventionally, it is at this point that it would be desirable to offer a case study to demonstrate the practical influence of these otherwise theoretical ideas about political and social change. Unfortunately, there is no such case study available (for now). Nonetheless, this is a good opportunity to offer some tentative thoughts on where this interest in problematisations could plausibly lead. In other words, we are asking ourselves: Why does this matter? Where do we go from here? Extensive ink has already been spilled regarding the first question. The significance of the link between knowledge, power and truth reconceptualises our understanding of political change and therefore makes a theoretical impact on our empirical analyses. However, it is the second question that is more interesting, and clearly linked to future empirical analysis. Indeed, and although this paper is not able to make any empirical contribution itself, it suggests that analysis for interpretive scholars should trace carefully and comprehensively particular ideas from their conception and how they have changed over time. It is important to fully appreciate the consequences of how we define power. If we take seriously the idea that power is a relationship, then this requires us to make far more extensive use of qualitative fieldwork techniques. Our observations of practices need to push far deeper than those with which we (as political scholars) often apply. This means that ‘yo-yo fieldwork’ does not go far enough to explore the governance practices of everyday life. Moreover, the focus of analysis cannot be on a single individual or small group of elite actors themselves. A full immersive study explores everyday practices by a multitude of competing actors that seek to create and re-create conflicts and tensions that lead to dilemmas and their resolution through problems.

Practically, this could mean that scholars take a particular concept, idea or belief – such as ‘parliamentary oversight’ – and to analyse how this has been interpreted by a number of different actors. The choice of actors should depend on who comes into ‘contact’ with this idea on an everyday level. In the case of this example, it would be parliamentary staff, select committee...
members, the parliamentary division of ministerial departments, and secretaries of state. Each of these actors will have a different view as to the extent they believe they ought to respond to this concept. Each actor will also engage with it in different ways. This means that practices vary amongst individual actors and groups. However, these practices are also constantly changing, far beyond grand reforms (such the recent reforms of the Wright Committee in Parliament, even though these have patently been important).\textsuperscript{56} Rather, everyday practices are constantly in tension because of competing interpretations: parliamentary support staff will and do have different priorities to parliamentary sections of ministerial departments. This means that, when exploring this concept of ‘parliamentary oversight’, we should explore how different actors have interpreted the term but, far more importantly, we must explore how different people have acted on it. What are the consequences of these competing interpretations on everyday practices of the concept? These play out in committee rooms and shift in many ways, pulling in different directions. Some, usually (but not always) ministers and civil servants, are interested in limiting parliamentary oversight to prevent detrimentally affecting what they would term ‘effective government’. Others, usually (but again not always) backbenchers, believe that parliamentary oversight needs to be increased precisely for the same reason – to improve ‘effective government’. What do these ideas therefore mean in practice? How is ‘parliamentary oversight’ played out? What are the problems that result from competing interpretations for the actors and their competitors? The UK has witnessed considerable change in the past two decades when it comes to ‘parliamentary oversight’. However, a key question, which analysis frequently seems to overlook, is to ask about the consequences on everyday practices. More than this: how are these differences adjudicated? Whose interpretation of ‘parliamentary oversight’ remains dominant? Why is this the case? What problems have political actors faced when they wish to implement mechanisms of parliamentary oversight? These questions are intimately linked to the idea of problematisation because they seek to address issues of the everyday in the context of political problems and the contestation between competing interpretations.

The previous paragraph is merely one of many possibilities to challenge how we understand political issues at the moment. It is a possible direction in which our interpretive studies can go. In provoking these questions, and indeed in posing this dilemma for dilemmas, this paper has pointed to the limits or boundaries that we have constructed around ‘dilemmas’ themselves. This paper has sought to go beyond the way we currently ‘do’ interpretive political analysis by offering new and different

questions for political phenomena. Identifying beliefs, practices and traditions remain vital for the interpretive approach, but it is time to take a closer look at how these beliefs, practices and traditions interact with one another. More often than not, they are not in a dialogue with one another, nor are they exploratory. They can be on the offensive, and sometimes on the defensive. They conflict with one another, do battle with one another. At the heart of anti-foundationalist philosophy is the claim that knowledge has no single foundation. The logical conclusion must be that knowledge is contested. Politics, by extension, is the process or struggle by which we come to terms with these contests and conflicts. If conflict is at the heart of politics, then our studies ought to reflect this, too.
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