Letting Easton Be Easton— An Interpretivist

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Surveying the field in mid-20th century, David Easton observed that political science primarily lacks “a conceptual framework or systematic theory to give meaning, coherence, and direction to ongoing research.”¹ In his most prominent work, *The Political System*, he writes, “In political science there has been little deliberate effort to formulate a conceptual framework for the whole field.”² The problem he undertakes, then, is that of “defining political science,” and thus to “define the core of the field.”³ This was Easton’s heroic mission.

After that publication, Easton enjoyed phenomenal success within the profession. Elected American Political Science Association president in 1969, studies conducted in the 1970s and 1980s showed that his peers ranked him fourth among the most prominent political scientists from 1945 to 1960, and second most prominent in the period 1960–1970. He ranked seventh among the twenty most cited political scientists in the decade 1970–79.⁴

Since its publication in 1953, Easton’s “conceptual framework” for political science has conventionally been depicted as a seminal work of “positivistic behavioralism.” He has been cast as a leader in the study of political behavior with an understanding of *science* as an effort to produce empirical hypotheses that can be falsified or verified. For example, in a 2006 survey of approaches to the study of politics, Mark Bevir classifies Easton as one of the foremost “behavioralists,” and an advocate of behavioralism as an “expression of the turn toward positivism.” Bevir then defines the “positivist concept of science” as seeking “universal, deductive, predictive, and verifiable theory.”⁵ Bevir reflects a well-established categorization of Easton as a “positivist,” and the equation of positivism and behavioralism.

Ironically, despite this wide spread characterization of Easton’s point of view, a question remains as to how well this classic work, *The Political System*, has been understood. Historian of the political science profession, John Gunnell, has observed that this book “has now become somewhat a prisoner of the perspectives that have subsequently informed its interpretive history.”⁶ He questions whether the book has ever

been truly understood, and notes that, even “after two generations,” the “actual text has never been fully and carefully analyzed.”⁷ Therefore, “it is worthwhile reexamining in detail the structure of the argument and determining its place in Easton’s path to the formulation of a systems analysis of political life.”⁸ He adds that given the passage of time since the book’s first publication in 1953, it “is in some respects possible today to understand the book better than it was understood in the 1950s, and it may be possible to understand the author better than he understood himself.”⁹

In this paper, I will undertake the same “reexamining” project as Gunnell, but from an entirely different perspective. This exegeses of the systematic political theory Easton introduces in *The Political System* focuses not on its history, but on its singularity; that is, its creative origins, intentionality, and interconnectedness.¹⁰ Taking this fresh look at the book has a surprising result. Freeing Easton from, as Gunnell has observed, the prison of “the perspectives that have subsequently informed its interpretive history,” this essay will show, perhaps for the first time, that *The Political System* actually makes a case for a thoroughly *interpretive*, as opposed to a positivistic, political science.

The Need for a Systematic Theory of Politics

While Easton advocated developing the study of politics as a science, his understanding of science is different from that embodied in contemporary positivism. He understands the concept broadly as an organized frame of reference with an empirical orientation, a defined subject matter (in this case, “politics”), and a systematic approach to seeking causal knowledge about the subject. Referring to the literature of his time, Easton regretted what he saw as the “flight from scientific reason, especially in the area of political knowledge.”¹¹ Indeed, Easton’s theory of the “political knowledge” which po-

jected “equilibrium theory” for, among other things, being too mechanistic to be a part of his systematic political theory, he is often associated with it. For example, in his history of the Caucus for a New Political Science, Clyde Barrow states that the “central focus” of Easton’s approach is “to understand how ‘decision-making’ (i.e., authoritative allocations of values) facilitate the equilibrium of the overall social system,” at page 217 (emp. ad.). Barrow 2008, pages 216–217. See Kelleher 2017 for an extensive critique of Barrow’s misrepresentation of Easton.

A more recent instance of conflating Easton with other writers under the rubrics “behavioral political science” and “functionalism” is by Mary Hawkesworth who writes that for Easton, as for these schools of thought, the political system is seen as functioning “so as to maintain homeostatic equilibrium.” See Hawkesworth, “Contending Conceptions of Science and Politics,” page 46, in Yanow 2014. But we will show that, as to Easton, nothing could be further from the truth.

⁷ Gunnell 2013, 198.

⁸ Gunnell 2013, 198.

⁹ Gunnell 2013, 205.

¹⁰ I appreciate the encouragement Professor Gunnell has given me in our private communications.

¹¹ Easton 1953, 1971, 6.

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¹ Easton 1953, 1971, 52.

² Easton 1953, 1971, 65.

³ Easton 1953, 1971, 96.

⁴ Lynn 1983; Robey 1982; Roettger 1978.

⁵ Bevir 2006, quote at page 18 in online version.

⁶ Gunnell 2013, 198. Besides Bevir, there are many other instances supporting Gunnell’s observation. For instance, although Easton re-

litical scientists have, and how it is to be verified, may be some of his least appreciated and most unexpected contributions to political science; therefore, they will be clarified in this paper.

Easton envisions science as the apex of human reason.¹² He notes that he is far from the first to search for a science of politics, but he is intent upon pursuing that goal. To have a science of politics, Easton argues, political scientists must begin with a clear idea of what “politics” is. “Where does the political begin and end, and how is it distinguishable if at all, from other kinds of data that we call economic, sociological, psychological, and so on.”¹³ Such a theoretical demarcation is needed “to identify the significant variables necessary to explain political activities and to show their interrelations.”¹⁴

Hyperfactualism

Easton found that one of the consequences for political science of lacking systematic theory was the pervasive condition he called “hyperfactualism.” Rather dramatically he declared that in his day, the “American political scientist is born free but is everywhere in chains, tied to a hyperfactual past.”¹⁵

Hyperfactualism makes the assumption that “science” consists exclusively of objective and detached fact gathering.¹⁶ But, in Easton’s view, this assumption about the nature of science is way off the mark. He offers a different understanding of science; that is, as an approach by researchers who act not with a blank slate of a mind, but who are infused with and guided by a range of prior interests. In his view, the “aspect of the event selected for description as the facts about it, is determined by the prior interest of the observer; the selection is made in the light of a frame of reference that fixes the order and relevance of the facts.”¹⁷ This prior set of interests, beliefs, and values serve as an interpretive framework that guides research and gives particular facts, out of the whole, their special significance. Without such “theoretical assumptions... it would be impossible for them to select meaningful facts.”¹⁸ Thus, no matter the reasons for the pursuit of research, it is “scientific” if it is conducted with a systematic approach and from within an orderly “frame of reference.”¹⁹

¹² See *The Political System*, Chapter Three, pp 64-89. Throughout the book he distinguished this understanding from the narrow positivistic sense of 19th century mechanics, as we discuss in this paper. He also distinguishes between pure science (seeking knowledge in itself), and applied science (knowledge used to solve problems in the theory of the political system). See *ibid*, pages 87-89, and Kelleher 2017.

¹³ Easton 1953, 1971, 92.

¹⁴ Easton 1953, 1971, 93, 98.

¹⁵ Easton 1953, 1971, 47. The phrase “born free but is everywhere in chains” is borrowed from Rousseau’s *Social Contract*.

¹⁶ Easton 1953, 1971, 66. Easton sees his views as part of the “modern psychology of perception,” and mocks the “pure empiricist tradition” of “objective observation” as a theory of an “immaculate perception.” In “Easton Responds to Classical Critics,” online at https://isistatic.org/journal-archive/pr/03_01/easton.pdf, ND (but early 1970s), page 278f. This places him even further from positivistic notions of “scientific objectivity.”¹⁷ Easton 1953, 1971, 53.

¹⁸ Easton 1953, 1971, 53.

¹⁹ Easton 1953, 1971, 53. Cf. Hawkesworth’s discussion of “pre-

His concept of science also includes an understanding of verifying or validating the fruits of research, which will be discussed further in a moment. And, as we will see, these principles inform Easton’s theory of political knowledge.

Below the Level of Theory

But, without a systematic theory to guide their selections of topics and related facts, how were political science researchers in the past able to write anything about politics? Indeed, how could separate fields of social science, such as political science and psychology, even develop without theoretical guidance?

In Easton’s interpretation, it was a pioneer’s subjective understanding of “the intrinsic logic” of each field in the social sciences that lead to their development as separate areas of research.²⁰ From his reading of history, Easton had learned that “sciences do not arise capriciously.”²¹ “Some process of selection does take place.”²² Easton notes that specializations in the social sciences have not developed as mere “historical accident,” but by “a rationale of their own.” Out of the complexity of “social life,” leading writers selected clusters of interactions for study.²³ Original thinkers in various fields linked together sets of recurring issues, problems, challenges, observations, and questions, often led by an *intuitive sense* that the issues were related.²⁴ Writers who shared overlapping intellectual passions helped develop specialized fields of social science.

For instance, psychology was pulled together, or *socially constructed*, by writers who shared the intellectual passion to understand individual behavior.²⁵ By the subject matter they put together they distinguished their field from other social sciences, such as economics, political science, or geography. Easton points out that those writers intuited a kind of “logic of the situation.” Those who made careful studies of particular aspects of society understood and shared certain “key questions” which helped to define their professions. Unarticulated tacit factors, such as a personal sense of the subject and intuition, served as research guides in lieu of a defined conceptual framework. Thus, leading figures paved the way, following their own *inner sense* of the subject matter.

For Easton, political science in particular, has risen largely out of the personal interest of pioneering researchers in understanding how policy for society is made and implemented. In the absence of a systematic theory defining the field of political science, “most students of political life do feel quite in-

supposition theory,” in Yanow et al 2014, 27-49.

²⁰ Easton 1953, 1971, 100.

²¹ Easton 1953, 1971, 147.

²² Easton 1953, 1971, 99.

²³ Easton 1953, 1971, 103.

²⁴ Easton 1953, 1971, 104.

²⁵ Easton 1953, 1971, 104. His references to “intuition” and “feel” suggest that a “field’s intrinsic logic or rationale” is a metaphorical personification of an abstraction, and that what he is actually referring to is the intellectual interests and aptitudes of individual pioneering researchers. In this sense, Easton was close to Polanyi’s conception of “Intellectual passions.” See Polanyi 1958.

instinctively that research into the political aspects of life does differ from inquiry into any other [aspect of social life].”²⁶ “Quite instinctively” political science researchers select some kinds of facts rather than others.²⁷ Among Easton’s most admired pioneering political scientists is V. O. Key, in part because he had a “feel for politics,” which distinguished his writings from the more crude hyperfactualists.²⁸

Common Sense

Apart from instinct and feel, some political scientists have used “common sense” notions of what is *political* as their implicit orientation to the subject. Common sense understands politics to include politicking—“maneuvering for position and power.”²⁹ It also understands politics as “an activity related in some vague way to problems of government or the making of policy for the whole society,” and involving disputes “over the policies accepted as authoritative for the society.”³⁰ Easton notes that one of the characteristics distinguishing science from common sense is the “deliberate attempt to bring to the surface what common sense leaves permanently concealed.”³¹ Thus, Easton wants “to raise these assumptions to the point of consciousness for the purposes of careful examination.”³² Common sense can be misleading or mistaken, and can vary among researchers, so an explicit systematic theory can center collective attention, and critically sift the relevant knowledge, if any, from writings based on differing notions of common sense, intuition, etc.³³

The Axiom

Aspiring to make the field more scientific, Easton asks how the conduct of political science research can be made more *rational* than by following various forms of preconscious intuition. Many of those who doubt the efficacy of scientific rationality have been relying on the guidance of such nebulous factors as feel, common sense, instinct, etc. But, as noted, this can lead to difficulties in a profession for several reasons, not the least of which is that various writers might not share the same sub-conceptual feelings. Thus, Easton will attempt to liberate the profession from its reliance on vague tacit notions by explicitly defining the core of the field in a way that both appeals to reason and can be criticized rationally. He begins this effort by presenting his basic axiom for political science.

Familiar to political scientists, it may fairly be stated that “politics,” the subject of political science, *is that human behavior undertaken in relation to the authoritative allocation of values for a society*.³⁴ This axiom is meant to, among

other things, “sum up our common sense conception of politics.”³⁵ Once its key terms are defined, which Easton does, the axiom raises the vagaries of undefined intellectual sensitivities to a clear conceptual level. Because it is in an articulated form, practitioners in the field will be able to rationally criticize the axiom. As we will see, Easton understood his axiom as having implications for not only the scope, but also the methods of the field.³⁶

Thus, Easton’s definition of “politics” is a theoretical position, or interpretive framework, and, as such, a way of seeing social interactions, and a principle for organizing and making sense of social observations. From the axiom-guided observations of the complex behavior of individual humans on the ground, which constitute political life, the vision of a persistent political system emerges. As Easton writes, with the axiom guiding observation it becomes clear that “political life constitutes a concrete political system which is an aspect of the whole social system.”³⁷ This insight calls attention to another fault of hyperfactualism, namely that it conceals “from students of political life the need to view the political system as a whole.”³⁸

For Easton, such terms as “political life” and “political process” are general references to the same subject matter as the “political system;” namely, all those human interactions done in relation to the authoritative allocation of values for a society. The “political system” entails “all those kinds of activities involved in the formulation and execution of social policy;” i.e., “the policy-making process.”³⁹ In practice, these specific components are *implicated* by the axiom. That is, the axiom guides the attention of the political scientist to those components. Because observers know what to look at, i.e., “politics,” they will soon see far more than what the axiom states, as a political system unfolds before them.⁴⁰

³⁵ Easton 1953, 1971, 128.

³⁶ Easton advised that “at a high level of abstraction,” such as his axiom, “theory needs to be free to develop unhampered by excessive worries of verification.” Easton 1953, 1971, 315. This statement alone greatly distinguishes Easton from positivism, which, as we will discuss further below, insists that theories be verifiable.

³⁷ Easton 1953, 1971, 97.

³⁸ Easton 1953, 1971, 78.³⁹ Easton 1953, 1971, 129.

⁴⁰ Some readers of *The Political System* might find it ironic that given its title, in the book, Easton does not elaborate specifically on the five components of his theory (inputs, conversion, outputs, feedback, and environment). Instead, he carries out an extended presentation of that theory in two succeeding works, *A Framework for Political Analysis*, Easton 1965a. And *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, Easton 1965b. While those works are rich in insights and guidance for the conduct of political science, they will not be examined in this paper. For Easton to elaborate on the elements of the theory of the political system would have been a distraction from his central aim in *The Political System*, which is to introduce his axiom, and to show the need for a systematic political theory and the lack thereof in political science. That is why he notes that the “merest hint of a theory [of the political system] that does emerge is incidental here to the main purpose.” Easton 1953, 1971, page 5. But because he understood that observing political life through the lens of the axiom culminates in a view of the political system, a book introducing the axiom and

²⁶ Easton 1953, 1971, 96.

²⁷ Easton 1953, 1971, 99.

²⁸ Easton 1953, 1971, 144, n12.

²⁹ Easton 1953, 1971, 127.

³⁰ Easton 1953, 1971, 127.

³¹ Easton 1953, 1971, 54.

³² Easton 1953, 1971, 59.

³³ Easton 1953, 1971, 60.

³⁴ Cf. Easton 1953, 1971, 128, 129 *passim*. My understanding of the part an axiom can play in a system of thought comes from the philosopher of science, Robert S. Hartman. See Hartman 1967.

Political Life as Human Life

Throughout his discussion, Easton stated his axiom in slightly different variations, and also mentioned some qualifying nuances he intended but which are not always specified in his definition of politics. For example, he notes that out of all the forms of social activity some are “closely related to what we call political life.”⁴¹ Indeed, one key element of Easton’s axiom is that it contemplates “life;” specifically, “the political aspects of life,” or “the political side of life.”⁴² By “life,” of course, he means human life. He observes, for instance, that “What we have in the concrete social world is a series of events in which human beings are involved.”⁴³ He also wrote, “As a social system, a society is a special kind of human grouping the members of which continually interact with one another and in the process develop a sense of belonging together [or,] common consciousness.”⁴⁴ He notes that “we are human beings who live in an organized society.”⁴⁵ While this may seem too obvious to merit mentioning, as we will see, his stress on human life has important methodological and epistemological implications.⁴⁶

The Axiom as a Rule of Relevance

Guided by his axiom, Easton writes that “Political life concerns all those varieties of activity that influence significantly the kind of authoritative policy adopted for a society and the way it is put into practice. We are said to be participating in political life when our activity relates in some way to the making and execution of policy for society.”⁴⁷ For him, then, a phrase like “relates in some way to the making and execution of policy for society” becomes a normative criteria, or rule, by which political scientists can make crucial research decisions. He writes, “If the object of [systematic] theory is to identify all the important variables, some criteria are required to determine relevance or importance... Without some guide to the investigator to indicate when a variable is politically relevant, social life would simply be an incoherent wilderness of activities.”⁴⁸ He hoped that his axiom, and the framework implied by it, would help researchers to cultivate a “keen sense of where and how to look for the locus of power and its influence.”⁴⁹

Intimacy and Method

Easton is offering political science a more humanized form of behavioralism than the positivistic brand. His behavioralism

explaining the need for it is aptly titled *The Political System*—the ultimate implication of the axiom.

⁴¹ Easton 1953, 1971, 97.

⁴² Easton 1953, 1971, 96, 126.

⁴³ Easton 1953, 1971, 53.

⁴⁴ Easton 1953, 1971, 135.

⁴⁵ Ibid, page Easton 1953, 1971, 103.

⁴⁶ As to why chimpanzee “politics” do not rise to the level of a political system, see Kelleher, “Can Chimpanzee Politics Constitute a Political System?”

⁴⁷ Easton 1953, 1971, 128.

⁴⁸ Easton 1953, 1971, 98.

⁴⁹ Easton 1953, 1971, 52.

envisions a distinct conception of the relationship between the researcher and the subject matter. He rejects the impersonal, if not alienated, relationship implicated in positivistic efforts at “objective” description. As we will see, Easton’s method is more empathic. This is why the question of how to obtain “intimate knowledge” of political actors arises in his approach, whereas such an inquiry is immaterial, if not inconceivable, in the positivistic approach dominant in his time (and ours).

Easton argued that his method would be able to “provide the basis for the kind of understanding of their data that students of political life seek.”⁵⁰ He felt that this framework would further provide such matters as “a clear perspective on the fundamental problems of the logic behind scientific method, unambiguous terminology, the introduction of new techniques and a deep awareness of the need to seek out *intimacy* with observed phenomena.”⁵¹

Easton notes that political science is currently behind the other social sciences in its use of the “repertoire of techniques for controlled observation, such as the varieties of highly developed forms of interview and objective participation, the correlation of data, experimentation, and the testing of theories.”⁵² Clearly, he anticipated that researchers would draw upon the wide variety of methods available in all the social sciences. For, it is not the method but *the axiom* that defines the field for Easton. He laments that the use of mere fact gathering “techniques has had the secondary result of keeping the research student from intimate contact with his [or her] material.”⁵³

Easton rejected those more positivistic orientations that envision a mechanistic theory of human action as a series of learned, or programmed, reactions to stimuli. This robotic view eschews empathy and blinds itself to the uniqueness of each individual, and to the role of meaning and volition in behavior. He found unacceptable “the damaging effects of this lack of intimate knowledge about political activity on the products of research.”⁵⁴ That “damage” is, of course, the lack of human understanding needed to solve some of the most pressing political problems of the day.⁵⁵

Also, in Easton’s methodology, the researcher can approach the subject matter from different perspectives, such as putting the focus on the “political process,” or on “political behavior.”⁵⁶ The former, more systemic meaning, “refers to the concrete system of intertwined activity which shapes authoritative policy.”⁵⁷ But the latter, more intersubjective “behavioral” approach, focuses on “a particular aspect of data, the psychological.”⁵⁸ When taking the behavioralist perspective as Easton understands it, political scientists “are studying the

⁵⁰ Easton 1953, 1971, 51.

⁵¹ Easton 1953, 1971, 52, emp. ad.

⁵² Easton 1953, 1971, 49.

⁵³ Easton 1953, 1971, 49.

⁵⁴ Easton 1953, 1971, 49.

⁵⁵ Easton 1953, 1971, 49.

⁵⁶ Easton 1953, 1971, 203.

⁵⁷ Easton 1953, 1971, 204-205.

⁵⁸ Easton 1953, 1971, 205.

political process by looking at the relation to it of the motivations, personalities, or feelings of the participants as individual human beings.”⁵⁹ This particular type of behavioral approach, Easton’s personal behavioralism, can obtain the intimate *knowledge* that students of political life seek precisely because it attends to those “attitudes...motivations and feelings of the human actor.” These are the moving elements of “acting human beings.”⁶⁰

In Easton’s behavioralism, then, for the political scientist to obtain such intimate knowledge, empathic interpretations of political behavior must be employed. Thus, Easton sees “a broad scope for direct field research...to make personal observations in the field according to acceptable standards for the collection of data.”⁶¹ His own efforts at making explicit the subconscious, or tacit, theory assumptions of his fellow political scientists, discussed above, is, in part, a participant observer’s act of empathic interpretation. What Easton adds to our understanding of political science knowledge, then, is that it includes a significant element of empathically knowing those feelings, meanings, and motivations experienced by actors *in relation to* the authoritative allocation of values for a society. Clearly, Easton’s idea of political science knowledge includes far more than what the statisticians and mathematicians would include. While important, their brand of abstract knowledge is unable to achieve the kind of intimacy Easton envisions.

The Axiom Compels Interpretive Methods

Easton’s axiom not just implies, but compels the inclusion of qualitative/interpretive methods in political science. If political science is the study of behavior undertaken in relation to politics, then the *intentions* of the actor are determinative of the behavior’s relevance. Whether an actor defines himself or herself as acting in a politically relevant way is a matter for the political scientist to determine through empathic observation, or interview, or some related technique. The behavior of a crowd at a football game can be similar to that of a crowd at a political rally. The meanings and intentions of the actors, less than their physical movements, determine which crowd is a fit subject for political science. Political groups, therefore, are defined first by the political intentions of their members. Mere numbers of people make no sense unless their shared meanings are known. Thus, even large-N studies require an element of empathy. How is a potential voting block to be known, except by the understanding of the shared intentions and meanings that relate the individual persons to one another? What determines the relevance to political science as between a group of persons sitting in a living room for a Tupperware party, or a baby shower, and one gathered for a candidate fundraiser? It is their respective intentions and shared meanings. As Easton notes, observing behavior is not enough, the political scientist “must also be prepared to show what makes it political.”⁶² It’s the

intentions.

Two Kinds of Interpretation—Theoretic and Empathic

Although he did not make the distinction explicitly, Easton’s axiom-centered systematic political theory appears to implicate two different kinds of interpretation. One can be understood as theoretic interpretation, and the other as empathic interpretation. The theoretic interpretation entails the act of integrating data (or smaller sets of meanings) into a pre-existing more general conceptual framework. An example of this is classifying observed behavior according to the categories of Easton’s theory of the political system—inputs, outputs, etc. The theory tells the political science researcher what to look for on the ground. A description of a particular pattern of behavior, such as the actions of legislators, is a set of meanings, which can then be subsumed under the appropriate category; the conversion process, for instance. This interpretation gives the behavior technical, or theoretic, meaning *for the political scientist*.

Positivistic political science also interprets events. It has a theoretical framework into which its so-called descriptions of behavior are integrated. The result, as we have argued, is a portrayal of a mechanistic political behavior. In this view, behavior is moved, but is not self-moved by people acting on meanings. No empathy is needed.

The empathic interpretation suggested by Easton, adds a second step of interpretation. That is, a researcher articulates the meanings that persons and groups of persons are acting upon in relation to politics. This set of meanings can include their definitions of the situations, their ideologies, their goals, strategies, etc. Such an interpretation is constructed by the researcher in conjunction with the subjects. And that entails a personal identification of the researcher with the subjects more broadly as fellow humans. This is the way intimate knowledge is obtained.⁶³

The logical operation of theoretic interpretation is more technical than that of empathic interpretation, which is more intuitive. But both types of interpretation, once given in written form, can be rationally criticized, and thus rejected, corrected, or confirmed by other members of the profession. To some extent, the two intellectual operations must be done together. That is, the intentions of the actors must be empathically interpreted as well as their overt behavior described as, for example, of the legislative sort, in order to be classified within the appropriate category, e.g., the conversion process.

Conclusion

Easton’s axiom based systematic political theory, which includes his theory of the political system, stands as a complete alternative to the positivistic framework. That axiom may now

⁵⁹ Easton 1953, 1971, 205.

⁶⁰ Easton 1953, 1971, 201.

⁶¹ Easton 1953, 1971, 49.

⁶² Easton 1953, 1971, 192.

⁶³ Frederic Schaffer’s suggestions for interpreting what he calls “experience-near” concepts offers some rules of art that would be useful in the conduct of Easton’s behavioralism. However, his notion of “experience-distant” concepts is not intended to convey a field defining theory, as is Easton’s *political system*. For a discussion of Schaffer’s rules of art see Bütte, 2016.

be fairly stated to define “politics” as the *volitional* behavior of persons and groups of persons who are *intentionally* engaged in matters related to the authoritative allocation of values for society.⁶⁴

The methodological principle, that the behavior under study is that of “persons,” necessitates the rejection of positivism’s mechanistic and deterministic form of explanation. Easton’s assumption that humans create the meanings by which they define the political situations they are in, and then act upon those meanings, explodes the old positivistic notion of personally detached “objective” observations of behavior, and compels the position of *personally involved* empathic observation and interpretation.

Under Easton’s principles, then, the explanation of behavior necessarily entails an exposition of the observer’s understanding of the *reasons* the actors had for their behavior. In some cases, groups and individuals may not fully understand their own motivations, or even misrepresent them. The political scientist can empathically observe and then clarify these motivations. The idea of causation remains, but the mechanistic tendency is factored out by the axiom’s implication of people as volitional, creative, intelligent, meaning making sentient beings. This soft theory of causation recognizes that no matter what was done, it could have been otherwise. In addition, the hope for a way to verify or refute hypotheses, in the manner of laboratory physics, must give way to a requirement more like the intersubjective confirmation or criticism of findings by peers. No one can, for instance, replicate in a laboratory a participant observer’s experience and observations for later analysis. But peers can criticize the methods and logic used, and, based on their own experience and personal judgment, credit contributions to knowledge. In this sense, then, Easton’s *interpretive behavioralism* would be conducted as a community project, working within a shared interpretive framework, and drawing from a plurality of methods.⁶⁵

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⁶⁴ Understanding the behavior as volitional adds to the challenge of explaining how a political system is able to persist. Every day, large numbers of individuals and groups act in ways that preserve their political system, although at any time they could choose to do otherwise, as they do in revolutions.

⁶⁵ See Polanyi 1946, 1958. An activist in the paradigm politics of his day, and apparently in an effort to maintain his alliance with his contemporary “behavioralists,” Easton introduced what he called the “behavioralist credo” in Easton 1965a, page 7. He identified himself with the term “behavioralist,” but he understood he had vast differences with his allies. As he commented following the Credo, “No single way of characterizing [these postulates] is satisfactory to everyone.” Easton 1965a, page 6. His 1969 Presidential Address, encouraged civic participation by political scientists, but made no changes in his political theory. See Easton 1969.

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