

Policy as Values

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Long ago and far away I took a course in philosophy of the social sciences. Surprisingly, this philosophy course involved a field trip and a very peculiar one indeed. On campus there was a small office in a bit of commercial space that housed, if memory serves, [Technocracy Inc.](#) The organisation was committed to advancing the cause of a rational and scientific approach to life in general and government in particular.

I have repeatedly encountered variations on this desire for a scientific approach to government, most recently in the blog post by my University of Ottawa colleague Scott Findlay provocatively entitled (at least for me) "[Policy as Science](#)". To summarize and oversimplify, he advocates a rational policy process that selects among candidate policies in a rational manner, using the scientific method. My first inclination was to discount if not dismiss the argument by simply asserting that in real life things are not so simple and grumble about the hubris of scientists.

But the very fact that the desire for a rational approach to policy making is always present and, at first glance, quite seductive, demands a more fulsome response. There are any number of possible objections: much has been written on whether policy making is rational and many have argued that it is not rational and indeed cannot be so. In fact, I have [argued](#), as have many [others](#), that policy making *should not* be reduced to rational problem solving.

But for the moment I want to focus on one aspect of the argument for a more rational or scientific approach to policy making. To reduce policy making to problem solving, as Scott suggests, assumes that we can agree on the nature of the problem and on the desired outcome. Let us consider each of these claims in turn.

Before there can be a policy choice there has to be agreement that there is a problem to be solved or at least one that government can do something about. In effect then, the art of governing is to [choose](#) the problems that will be addressed and which are to be more or less ignored. However, among the many challenges of governing is the simple fact that we do not always agree on the nature of the problem. I observe that Canadians eat too much salt, which causes widespread high blood pressure. Others say that there is no scientific consensus on the matter and [scoff at the idea](#) that there is a problem to be solved. In effect, fighting over how to define the problem and [the science underlying problems](#) is often a big part of the policy process – witness the debates about climate change or [drug addiction](#).

Assuming we can agree on the nature of the problem (or at least most of us can, at least for a time) according to Scott a rational policy process would see us choose the option that is most likely to achieve desired outcomes. However, we are confronted by the reality that we are unlikely to agree on what is desirable. Policymaking is never only about solving a problem. It is addressing a problem in a way that is acceptable to at

least some citizens some or most of the time. It is making decisions that advance a broader overall agenda if not a broader philosophy. It is addressing public concerns in a [politically prudent way](#).

To return to the case of dietary sodium, we have no way of demonstrating unequivocally whether what is required is social marketing, industry self-regulation or government regulation of the food industry. And even if it could be shown that government regulation of the food industry is the optimal way to reduce the amount of salt in our diet, small-c conservative governments are [unlikely to want to do so](#) on broadly philosophical grounds. Government regulation of food raises concerns about [undue government influence](#) in the lives of citizens. The latter objection cannot be resolved with reference to science alone. It is a normative claim and requires a different kind of reasoning altogether.

In effect, most of the truly interesting and non-trivial policy issues do not lend themselves to rational decision-making. Why? Because they involve disagreements over values and such disagreements, as Hume reminded long ago, cannot be resolved with reference to science alone.