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# Ideal vs. Non-ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map\*

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**Abstract:** This article provides a conceptual map of the debate on ideal and non-ideal theory. It argues that this debate encompasses a number of different questions, which have not been kept sufficiently separate in the literature. In particular, the article distinguishes between the following three interpretations of the ‘ideal vs. non-ideal theory’ contrast: (i) full compliance vs. partial compliance theory; (ii) utopian vs. realistic theory; (iii) end-state vs. transitional theory. The article advances critical reflections on each of these sub-debates, and highlights areas for future research in the field.

## Introduction

In recent years, political philosophers have started to interrogate the methodology they use to develop normative prescriptions. Driving this ‘methodological turn’ in political philosophy has been a frustration with the subject’s perceived lack of influence on real-world politics. Some voiced the concern that the dominant – Rawlsian – paradigm in the discipline was somehow too detached from reality to guide political action. From this perspective, much of the current work in political philosophy is defective because it is of little (possibly no) practical help.

This methodological debate on the proper nature of political philosophy, and its ability to guide action in real-world circumstances, has become known as the debate on ideal and non-ideal theory. A quick glance at what falls under the heading ‘ideal/non-ideal theory’, however, reveals the heterogeneity of this debate. There are at least three distinct meanings given to the adjectives ‘ideal’ and ‘non-ideal’, each corresponding to a different cluster of questions.<sup>1</sup>

First, ‘ideal theory’ may be taken to mean ‘full-compliance theory’, and ‘non-ideal theory’ may be understood as ‘partial compliance’ theory. If this how we think of the ideal/non-ideal distinction, then the debate on ideal and non-ideal theory focuses on the question of what duties and obligations apply to us in situations of partial compliance as opposed to situations of full compliance.

Second, ‘ideal theory’ may be taken to mean ‘utopian or idealistic theory’, and ‘non-ideal theory’ may be understood as ‘realistic’ theory. On this second reading of the ‘ideal/non-ideal’ distinction, the debate on ideal and non-ideal theory focuses on the question of whether feasibility considerations should constrain normative political theorizing and, if so, what sorts of feasibility constraints should matter.

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<sup>1</sup> For various attempts to systematize the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory see Stemplowska (2008), Robeyns (2008), Swift (2008), and Jubb (forthcoming).

Third, and finally, ‘ideal theory’ may indicate what one might call ‘end-state’<sup>2</sup> theory, and ‘non-ideal theory’ may be understood as ‘transitional’ theory. If this is how we understand the ideal/non-ideal distinction, then the debate on ideal and non-ideal theory focuses on the question of whether a normative political theory should aim at identifying an ideal of societal perfection, or whether it should focus on transitional improvements without necessarily determining what the ‘optimum’ is.

Although these three debates have all originated in response to the methodological paradigm set by John Rawls, and although they almost all stem from its perceived inability to have an impact on real-world politics, they each deal with a distinctive set of questions. In the three main sections of this article, I shall look at each set of questions in turn. My aim in doing so is to provide readers with a clear map of an otherwise rather ‘messy’ conceptual terrain. This exercise in ‘conceptual cartography’<sup>3</sup> seems to me to be a necessary precondition for making progress in thinking about the aims and methods of political philosophy.

Before getting started, one prefatory remark is in order. As I said, the debate on ideal and non-ideal theory has for a large part revolved around Rawls’s theorizing about justice, and this article is no exception. That is, much of my discussion will focus on ideal and non-ideal theorizing about *justice* in particular, and will often make reference to Rawls.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, a wider-ranging analysis of methodological debates in political theorizing would require more space than I have available here.

### **1. Full Compliance vs. Partial Compliance**

The distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory in contemporary political philosophy finds its origins in John Rawls’s seminal book *A Theory of Justice*. In this context, ‘ideal theory’ stands for theory designed under two assumptions: (i) all relevant agents comply with the demands of justice applying to them, and (ii) natural and historical conditions are favourable – i.e., society is sufficiently economically and socially developed to realize justice (Rawls 1999a: 8, 215; Rawls 1999b: 4-6). ‘Non-ideal theory’ corresponds to the negation of (i) and/or (ii). As Rawls himself admits, much of his work is concerned with ideal theory, and only a few pages are devoted to the problems arising in circumstances of partial compliance, where agents are acting unjustly. The reason for this, says Rawls, is that ideal theory provides ‘the only basis for the systematic grasp of [the] more pressing problems [of non-ideal theory]’, namely of how to respond to injustice (Rawls 1999a: 8).

In recent years, however, this Rawlsian focus on ideal theory, and specifically on full-compliance theory, has been increasingly perceived as suspicious. Some have started to doubt that a theory designed under conditions of full compliance can take us very far in understanding what is required of us in conditions of partial compliance. To be sure, ideal theory allows us to identify instances of partial compliance (by telling us what full compliance requires), but it does not tell us how to respond to them. From the perspective of these critics, contemporary political philosophy should shift its focus from full compliance to partial compliance.<sup>5</sup> To see this, it suffices to consider phenomena such as world poverty or racial discrimination. Their persistence

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<sup>2</sup> As should be obvious from the context, I am here using the qualification ‘end-state’ differently from Nozick (1974).

<sup>3</sup> I owe this expression to Geoff Brennan.

<sup>4</sup> On the justice-centered nature of the ideal vs. non-ideal theory debate, to the exclusion of other concepts (e.g., democracy, liberty, etc.), see Stemplowska and Swift (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> As I have mentioned earlier, non-ideal theory concerns not just partial compliance, but also ‘unfavourable’ conditions. Due to space constraints, here I only focus on partial compliance.

is to a large extent due to people's – both ordinary citizens' and officials' – unwillingness to act on the duties that apply to them (e.g., to help the poor, and not to discriminate on the basis of race). The important question for a political theory aiming at guiding action in the real world, then, is 'What ought we to do in circumstances where others do not do their part?' (cf. Feinberg 1973, Sher 1997, Murphy 2003, Schapiro 2003, Ashford 2003, and Cullity 2004).

As David Miller (2011: 233) has recently pointed out, three broad answers are available: 'Do exactly your fair share, and no more than that',<sup>6</sup> 'Do more than your fair share', 'Do less than your fair share'. Although discussions of partial compliance are still in their infancy, the available literature already suggests that none of these three options is uniquely satisfactory. Different solutions will fit our intuitions in different cases (cf. Miller 2011).<sup>7</sup>

Consider a scenario involving an unjust society, where a small subset of the citizenry enjoys considerable wealth, while many are severely deprived. Sandra is among the wealthy, and realizes that part of what she currently possesses is not justly hers. She knows that fully eradicating poverty would require institutional reform, but she also understands that reform is unlikely to occur in the near future. In light of this, she decides to respond to the injustice of her society by giving away some of her possessions. But how much ought she to give? Her answer is 'my fair share', i.e., that share of resources which would eliminate poverty, provided everyone else also did 'their fair share'. Unfortunately, everyone else fails to do their fair share, and Sandra's contribution only helps a handful of people. But suppose Sandra could give away a lot more at little cost to herself (she is very wealthy indeed), thereby helping a much larger number of her fellow citizens escape poverty. In those circumstances, many would think, she ought morally to do so, namely she ought to do *more than her fair share* (cf. Miller 2011: 231).<sup>8</sup>

This solution, however, seems inadequate in other cases, such as the following one. Hugh, one of Sandra's compatriots, decides to spend five hours every week campaigning for institutional reform, and let us assume that this corresponds to his fair share. If everyone else in society did the same, institutional reform would occur much more rapidly, but unfortunately, some are simply too busy enjoying their wealth or coping with their poverty. Under these circumstances, it is not clear whether Hugh should do more than his fair share of five hours per week. What would really make a difference to the speed of reform is an increase in the number of political campaigners, not greater effort from those who are already politically engaged. If so, it may very well be that Hugh (unlike Sandra) only has a duty to do *his fair share, and no more than that*.

Finally, the injunction – '*Do less than your fair share*' – might also have some plausibility, especially when *even* doing one's fair share would not increase the likelihood of the desired outcome. To see this, consider the following case. Jason knows that a political activist in his society, Luc, is about to be unjustly incarcerated.

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<sup>6</sup> A particularly sophisticated version of this principle is defended in Murphy (2003).

<sup>7</sup> Given space constraints, in what follows I consider what *individuals* ought to do in light of the injustice of the society in which they live. Of course, one might also ask what institutions ought to do in the face of injustice. For instance, it might be argued that, while affirmative action programmes would be unjust in a context without any racial discrimination, they ought to be implemented in a society with widespread racial prejudices.

<sup>8</sup> A possible response would be to argue that, in this case, Sandra's duty to give more than her fair share would be one of 'charity' or 'assistance', rather than one of justice (Miller 2011: 243n17). Once again, due to space constraints, I do not explore this complication here. For discussion of partial compliance along similar lines see also Stemplowska (forthcoming).

He also knows that, if enough people join him in protest, the sentence will be revoked. Unfortunately, none of his fellow citizens intends to do his or her fair share of protesting. Under these circumstances, it is not obvious that Jason still ought to protest. *Ex hypothesi*, doing so would have no impact on Luc's incarceration, and would only generate hostility against Jason.

These stylized examples breed scepticism regarding the possibility of identifying a master-principle we can apply in circumstances of partial compliance, telling us *precisely* what each ought to do. In light of this, I venture the hypothesis that, in situations of partial compliance, individuals ought to do what is *reasonably* within their power to respond to existing injustice (cf. Rawls 1999a: 99-100, and Simmons 2010: 20). What counts as *reasonable*, in turn, depends on the particular situation at hand. For instance, in the case involving Sandra, reasonable seems to be more than one's fair share, while in the case involving Jason and Luc, even doing one's fair share seems unreasonable because pointless.<sup>9</sup> If this hypothesis is broadly correct, a crucial task for participants in the debate on ideal/non-ideal theory in this first sense is to flesh out more concretely what the 'reasonableness' constraint amounts to, especially in complex cases involving the injustice of entire societies and their institutions (cf. Schapiro 2003, Simmons 2010: 26-7, Jubb forthcoming, Stemplowska forthcoming).<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Utopian vs. (More or Less) Realistic Theory<sup>11</sup>

The second sense in which theories may be 'ideal' or 'non-ideal' concerns the types of feasibility constraints we might take into account when designing normative principles. When it comes to the debate on ideal/non-ideal theory so understood, two distinctions have to be made: one categorical, the other comparative. First, we need to distinguish between 'fully utopian' theories, which altogether reject the need to place feasibility constraints on principles of justice, and 'realistic' theories, which accept some such constraints. Second, among the latter group of theories, we need to distinguish between more or less realistic ones, depending on what kinds of real-world constraints they factor into the design of normative principles. In what follows, I examine each pair of theories in turn.

Before doing so, however, let me anticipate that both 'fully utopian' and 'heavily realist' theorists have developed their arguments taking John Rawls's work on justice as their target. As will become apparent in what follows, for the former, Rawls's account of justice is too realistic and fact-constrained. For the latter, it is excessively idealistic and insufficiently sensitive to the facts that characterize real-world politics.

### (i) Utopian vs. Realistic Theories

Utopian theories argue that principles of justice are altogether independent of factual constraints. The most prominent contemporary advocate of this mode of theorizing is G. A. Cohen (2003, 2008).<sup>12</sup> In Cohen's view, justice is one value to be promoted

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<sup>9</sup> Note a further complication, namely that not in all circumstances will it be possible to identify what a fair share is.

<sup>10</sup> Note, moreover, that this 'reasonableness' constraint makes the relevant duties necessarily 'imperfect' (i.e., their content and mode of performance are not fully specified). From this, some would conclude that the duties in question cannot be duties of justice. For discussion see Valentini (2011c).

<sup>11</sup> For a related discussion of the role of facts in political theorizing see Stears (2005).

<sup>12</sup> A very recent utopian approach along these lines has been defended by Estlund (2011), who denies that facts about human nature (and specifically about human motivation) should place

among many and, *per se*, it does not tell us what we ought to do. What we ought to do instead depends on the appropriate balance between justice and other values, in conjunction with feasibility constraints. As he puts it:

Justice is not the only value that calls for (appropriately balanced) implementation: other principles, sometimes competing with justice, must also be variously pursued and honored. And the facts help to decide the balance of due deference to competing principles: the facts constitute the feasible set that determines the optimal point(s) on a set of fact-independent indifference curves whose axes display packages of different extents to which competing principles are implemented (Cohen 2003: 244-5, on this see also Hamlin and Stemplowska 2012; cf. Mason 2004 and Goodin 1995).

From this perspective, justice is a timeless (fact-free) value, perhaps akin to a Platonic ideal. The main ‘job’ of the political philosopher is not to discover what we should do, but rather to discover what we should ‘think’ (Cohen 2008: 268). The fundamental question of justice, for the utopian theorist, is therefore not primarily normative, but evaluative (Valentini 2011b: 30-1, Tomlin forthcoming, cf. Lawford-Smith 2010: 359-60). The normative level is only reached when values other than justice and facts are combined together to deliver certain ‘rules of social regulation’.<sup>13</sup>

G. A. Cohen has developed this approach in response to John Rawls’s more ‘realistic’ take on political philosophy. For Rawls, principles of justice are developed in response to the human condition, which includes moderate scarcity and limited altruism (Rawls 1999a: §22). It is because human beings find themselves in this predicament that principles of justice, establishing how conflicting claims should be adjudicated, need to be developed. Different people have different ends and goals, whose pursuit requires material resources. Justice determines how resources should be fairly distributed among them; it determines who has a right to what.

From this Rawlsian perspective, principles of justice are normative, rather than primarily evaluative. They tell us ‘what we should *think* about what we [our society] should *do*’ (Gilabert 2011: 58 emphasizes original).

What to make of the debate between these two approaches? One possibility, explored by some (Williams 2008: §4&5, Tomlin forthcoming), is to adopt a ‘conciliatory’ attitude, suggesting that the two approaches are consistent with each other. The idea is that the main difference between Cohenite and Rawlsian accounts lies in what they *call* ‘principles of justice’: it is a matter of terminology. From a substantive perspective, Cohen and Rawls can in principle agree. What Rawls calls ‘justice’, Cohen calls ‘rules of regulation’, but both can agree that it is those rules (arrived at by ‘mixing’ values with facts) that we should follow. After all, what’s in a name?

In the present context, I do not wish to comment on whether the substance of this argument is correct (i.e., on whether Rawls’s and Cohen’s approaches are compatible), but I limit myself to pointing out that there might be more ‘in a name’ than proponents of this argument think.<sup>14</sup> ‘Justice’ has a privileged position in the history of political ideas. Principles of justice are typically seen as particularly stringent, and as giving rise to rights. To say that something is a matter of justice is to make a particularly weighty normative assertion. If this is correct, arguably the

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constraints on political philosophy. Note, however, that Estlund’s view (2011: 224) differs somewhat from Cohen’s.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. what Hamlin and Stemplowska (forthcoming) call the ‘theory of ideals’.

<sup>14</sup> Thanks to Patrick Tomlin for discussion of this.

Cohenite approach has the defect of depriving justice of its special interest and importance. If justice is only one value among many – with no special normative, rights-generating, status – then why obsess so much about it?

Let me now turn to a second, less conciliatory, reading of the Cohen-Rawls debate. On this reading, the approaches of these two thinkers cannot be so easily reconciled because they rest on incompatible assumptions. Cohen's view appears to have to rely on strong metaphysical presuppositions about the existence of principles of justice valid across all possible worlds. Rawls, by contrast, more modestly attempts to design principles for this and nearby possible worlds, inhabited by beings like us, in circumstances similar enough to those in which we live (Pogge 2008, see also Miller 2008, cf. Ronzoni and Valentini 2008). The design of these principles need not presuppose any controversial claims about the existence of a timeless and independent moral truth. Instead, it may simply consist in the attempt to 'systematize' our considered judgments in reflective equilibrium (cf. Jubb 2009: 345ff.). If this is correct, from Rawlsian premises we cannot arrive at Cohen-like conclusions and vice versa (cf. Tomlin forthcoming for discussion).

*(ii) More or Less Realistic Theories<sup>15</sup>*

In the previous subsection we have looked at those critics of Rawls who, like G. A. Cohen, find his theorizing about justice excessively contaminated with facts. We now turn to those critics who agree with Rawls that certain facts are crucial to the design of plausible normative political principles, but contest Rawls's own selection of the relevant facts. In their views, Rawls's theory of justice is too 'idealized', in the sense that it assumes away some crucial facts characterizing real-world politics.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the most sympathetic among these critics is Jeremy Waldron (1999), who has famously criticized Rawls for failing to take seriously a key feature of political life as we know it: reasonable disagreement about *justice*. From Waldron's perspective, Rawls's 'circumstances of justice' are only partial, and should be supplemented with what he calls the 'circumstances of politics', which include people's willingness to coordinate, and disagreement about what count as just terms of coordination (Waldron 1999: 102). From this perspective, one could say, Rawls is not 'realistic enough'. His description of the problem giving rise to concerns of justice is defective, because it assumes away one of the distinguishing features of human political life.

The existence of disagreement and conflict is also emphasized by other scholars, whose position is more hostile to Rawls, and who – following Bernard Williams (2005) and Raymond Geuss (2008) – are broadly known as 'political realists' (for an overview, see Galston 2010. Cf. Mills 2005, McCarthy 2004, Farrelly 2007, Sangiovanni 2008, and some so-called 'critical theorists' more generally).<sup>17</sup> Although political realists differ in the ways they articulate their views, they all believe that political philosophy should give much greater attention to existing power-

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. the distinction between hopeful and hopeless theories elaborated by David Estlund (2007: 263-70), and Ypi's (2010) discussion of the role of facts and idealized assumptions in recent debates on global justice.

<sup>16</sup> These critics often point to Onora O'Neill's (1996: 39-44) distinction between 'abstractions' and 'idealizations', where the latter indicate false assumptions about a particular object of study (e.g., society is well-ordered).

<sup>17</sup> See, more generally, the contributions to the special symposium on 'Realism in Political Theory', *European Journal of Political Theory*, 9 (4) (2010).

structures, and drop implausibly optimistic assumptions about human nature, such as Rawlsian full compliance (which we examined in Section 1).

From a realist perspective, the achievement of perfect justice may be imaginable, but it is not feasible. It is therefore naïve, and ineffective, to hold existing societies to account on the basis of such demanding moral standards. The normative priority in politics should not be the achievement of fairness or justice, but rather that of peace, security, and order (Horton 2010, Galston 2010: 394-5). In light of this, realists urge us to take more of the *status quo* into account when designing normative principles, including considerations about human selfishness, greediness, corruptibility, and so forth (North 2010: 382, and Galston 2010). Only by doing so will our principles be capable of effectively criticizing existing political circumstances, and guide action in the real world.

What to think of the debate between Rawlsian ‘realistic-utopianism’ and full-blown realism?<sup>18</sup> In order to answer this question, we need to disambiguate between two readings of the realist critique of Rawls’s position. On one reading, Rawls’s mistake does not lie in the way he theorizes about justice (i.e., too fact-insensitive), but in his neglect of *other*, more heavily fact-bound, social ideals such as legitimacy, democracy, peace, security and so forth. For example, it might be argued that, while reasonable disagreement about justice is not a key assumption for the elaboration of conceptions of justice, it is for that of conceptions of democracy (see Tomlin 2012, Waldron 1999, but cf. Valentini 2012). Similarly, while the values of peace and security presuppose the human potential for aggressive action, *arguably* justice does not. If we follow this line of thought, the realist critique of ‘realistic utopianism’ loses its methodological flavour, and turns into a critique of contemporary political philosophy’s perceived ‘obsession’ with justice, to the exclusion of other important political values.

On a second reading of the realist critique, Rawls’s mistake lies in a failure to take into account all those facts that are relevant to theorizing *about justice* itself, where justice is understood as setting out an *overall* social ideal, encompassing the most important dimensions of political value. In this second sense, the dispute between Rawlsians and realists is hard to adjudicate, for there appear to be good arguments in favour and against each side.

On the one hand, the less real-world factual constraints are taken into account in the design of a normative political theory (which is meant to apply to the real world), the more practically ineffective its principles are likely to be. This is for two reasons. First, the principles may be designed to respond to a situation different from the one we are actually facing (cf. Robeyns 2008 and Valentini 2009). Plainly, as we saw in Section 1, the answer to the question ‘What ought I to do?’ varies depending on whether we assume full or partial compliance. Second, from a motivational point of view, relatively fact-free principles are unlikely to be effective, because they are probably at odds with common-sense morality. While we might take seriously the idea of donating a small portion of our income to the poor, we are likely to resist a prescription requiring us to donate 60% of it – even if, *ex hypothesi*, this is what ‘ideal justice’ demands (Valentini 2011d: 128, cf. Carens 1996).

On the other hand, the more factual constraints are introduced in the elaboration of normative political principles, the more these will appear to offer an uncritical defence of the *status quo*. For instance, if we assume partial, rather than full, compliance, we are likely to become blind to the extent of injustice

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<sup>18</sup> On the idea of a ‘realistic utopia’ see Rawls (1999b: 6 and 12ff.).

characterizing the world in which we live (Stemplowska 2008: 332-3, Robeyns 2008, Swift 2008: 387, Valentini 2009: 339, Simmons 2010). Going back to our earlier example, by taking people's selfishness seriously we may be led to adopt the prescription that the wealthy should donate 1% of their income to the poor. This conclusion, however, would obscure the extent of their wrongdoing, since, *ex hypothesi*, they ought to donate 60% (cf. Carens 1996: 164-5).

In light of this, perhaps Joseph Carens (1996) is right to suggest that the correct level of idealization, and the related distance between the 'ought' and the 'is', should depend on the particular *aims* of one's theorizing. Excluding altogether absurd moral demands, which would involve breaking the laws of physics, or ignoring the deepest features of human psychology, we may legitimately vary the factual input informing normative political theories. *If* we want a yardstick for measuring how much our society is failing compared to a fully ideal one, then we need to make minimal factual assumptions, such as moderate scarcity, limited altruism, and perhaps reasonable disagreement. That is, we must not include unjust human conduct. *If*, on the other hand, we wish to design prescriptions that are likely to be effective, *given* some common flaws in human behaviour, then we better factor in more real-world constraints.

If we take this view, political theories can be seen as more or less realistic along a continuum, with no categorical difference between them (cf. Hamlin and Stemplowska 2012). The key to a successful theory would be to make sure that its factual input is in some sense 'appropriate' to the particular question it aims to answer. For instance, a normative theory addressing the question 'What ought a soldier to do in the battlefield?', should take into consideration the epistemic and psychological burdens typically faced by soldiers in that situation. If it does not, the theory will fail to answer its intended question.<sup>19</sup> Since the relevant facts will vary on a case-by-case basis, it is almost impossible to come up with a *general* rule prescribing what the correct level of idealization in normative theorizing should be.

In sum, whether a normative political theory is sufficiently 'fact-sensitive/realistic' or not depends on its intended aim and question. This, in turn, suggests that the 'debate' between more-or-less realistic theories is somewhat misconstrued. Realists and Rawlsian liberals are not in disagreement about how to answer the *same question*. Rather, they seem to be more aptly seen as answering *different questions*. The former are looking for principles which are likely to be effective here and now, the latter seek to develop theories capable of identifying the full extent to which the world in which we live is failing with respect to a grand social ideal. (Of course, this is not to say that participants in this debate would necessarily endorse this characterization.)

### **3. End-State vs. Transitional Theory**

Let me now turn to the third and last understanding of the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory. This understanding too can be found in the works of John Rawls, and corresponds to the dichotomy between what one might call 'end-state' and 'transitional' theory. On this account, ideal theory sets out a long-term goal for institutional reform. Non-ideal theory, on the other hand, 'asks how this long-term goal might be achieved, or worked toward, usually in gradual steps' (Rawls 1999b: 89). Rawls is also keen to emphasize that non-ideal theory so conceived presupposes ideal theory, '[f]or until the ideal is identified, at least in outline ... nonideal theory

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<sup>19</sup> I thank Seth Lazar for discussion on this.

lacks an objective, an aim, by reference to which its queries can be answered' (Rawls 1999b: 90).

This normative and logical priority of 'end-state' theorizing over transitional considerations has been recently put into question, most famously by Amartya Sen (2006 and 2009; see also Phillips 1985 and Wiens forthcoming). Sen has argued that, *if* the aim of theorizing about justice is to help us understand how to make the world *more* just, we should not invest much energy in scrutinizing what would make the world *fully* just. In other words, for Sen, end-state theory (what he calls 'transcendental theorizing') is neither necessary, nor sufficient for transitional theory (Sen 2006 and 2009).

First, end-state theory is not necessary for determining justice-improvements because these can be detected independently of knowing what would qualify as a perfectly just world. For instance, knowing that, all other things being equal, a world with racial discrimination is more unjust than one without it does not presuppose knowing what a fully just world would look like (Sen 2006: 218; 2009: 96 and 103, see also Lawford-Smith 2010: 362).

Second, end-state theory is not sufficient for determining justice-improvements because these require the elaboration of a metric, allowing us to measure how far any given state of affairs is from the ideal (Sen 2009: 98-101).

Both of Sen's claims, even most advocates of Rawls confirm, are correct. The question is the extent to which their correctness threatens the mainstream Rawlsian paradigm in political philosophy. In this respect, responses to Sen's criticisms have varied. Some have insisted on the importance of ideal theory at least as a means of determining *how* unjust the world is. After all, we do not simply want to know what would make the world more just, but also when the world is fully just and what full justice demands of us (see, e.g., Gilibert forthcoming, Robeyns forthcoming, Valentini 2011a, Stemplowska 2008: 336-7). From this perspective, end-state theory need not be 'prior' to transitional theorizing, but still qualifies as an important component of a broader normative (action-guiding) enterprise.

Others have instead explicitly provided a full-blown defence of the priority of end-state over transitional theorizing. Following Rawls (1999b: 89), A. John Simmons (2010: 34) has pointed out that the prescribed moves in a theory of transition have to be both morally permissible and likely to be successful. But without an ideal theory telling us (i) what counts as permissible and (ii) what counts as success (i.e., full justice/approaching full justice), we cannot establish whether our transitional recommendations fulfill these requirements (cf. Swift 2008: 375, Gilibert forthcoming, Robeyns forthcoming, and Jubb forthcoming).

In making this point, Simmons builds on Sen's claim that to know which one of two mountains is the taller, one need not know the height of the tallest mountain on Earth. Although this is certainly true, says Simmons, it does not defeat the priority of end-state over transitional theory. This is because

which of two smaller "peaks" of justice is the higher (or more just) is a judgment that matters conclusively only if they are both on equally feasible paths to the highest peak of perfect justice. And in order to endorse a route to that highest peak, we certainly do need to know which one that highest peak is (Simmons 2010: 35).

Simmons's remarks here point in the direction of an under-explored area in political theory, one that Sen himself does not appear fully to appreciate, namely the analysis of transitional 'constraints'. First, there are 'feasibility' constraints, to do with

physical, psychological and social facts – namely the sorts of constraints we examined in our discussion of ‘realist’ theorizing (see Gilabert and Lawford-Smith forthcoming). Second, there are moral constraints, to do with the ‘moral costs of transition’ (Räikkä 1998) from the current state of affairs to the ‘desired’ one. For instance, if achieving a just social order quickly would require initiating a civil war leading to much death and suffering, this ‘quick’ path to justice would not be ‘morally accessible’, to use Buchanan’s (2004: 62) phrase. Similarly, if achieving a certain improvement in justice now would prevent us from achieving greater justice in the future, the moral (opportunity) costs of bringing about this slightly improved state of affairs would probably be too high (Robeyns forthcoming).

In sum, once again it seems that both advocates and critics of Rawlsian ideal theorizing have a point. On the one hand, Sen is correct in arguing that, strictly speaking, end-state principles are not necessary to make justice-comparisons, and that comparisons allowing us to identify justice-improvements have not been given the attention they deserve. On the other hand, Simmons is probably right in insisting that ‘ideal’ normative considerations should in part influence our choice of paths for justice-improvements. The question of how this should be done, however, is still vastly under-explored, and is likely to keep a good number of political philosophers busy in years to come.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have offered an overview of three ‘strands’ of the so-called debate on ideal and non-ideal theory. My aim in doing so has been to bring some clarity to this debate, by separating the different types of questions that might be asked within it. To be sure, there are clear connections between my three chosen ‘strands’, some of which are implicit in my discussion. Still, keeping them separate can help us make progress in an area where theorists often appear to talk at cross purposes.

Finally, from a more substantive point of view, my discussion suggests that there is no right answer to the question of whether a normative political theory should be ‘ideal’ or ‘non-ideal’ (meaning more-or-less realistic). What types of idealizations are appropriate, and what facts ought to be taken into account in the design of normative principles depends on the particular question the theory itself is meant to answer.

## **About the author**

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