

From Moral Principles to Political Judgments: The Case for Pragmatic Idealism

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Abstract: Political judgments usually combine a normative principle or intuition with an appreciation of empirical facts regarding the achievability of different options and their potential consequences. The interesting question dividing partisans of political idealism and realism is whether these kinds of consideration should be integrated into the normative principles themselves or considered apart. At first sight, if a theorist is concerned with guiding political judgments, non-ideal or realist theorizing (directly integrating such considerations) can seem more attractive. In this paper, however, I argue that ideal theorizing might be considered valuable even by theorists moved by a pragmatic concern (guiding political judgments) because it is less exposed to conservatism. I nonetheless contend that the aim to guide action in the world as it is should not be abandoned. Therefore, I outline a four-step method for proceeding from abstract moral principles to concrete political judgments and apply it to a test case.

Keywords: morality, politics, idealism, realism, pragmatism, justice, political normativity

1. Introduction

Political judgments – whether to vote for A or B or to prefer policy x or y – are usually a combination of normative principles or intuitions with an appreciation of empirical facts. For example, I support candidate A (political judgment) because she seems to be the most able and willing (empirical judgment) to fight against poverty (normative consideration). Or I think that kerosene should be taxed (political judgment) because its high contribution to global warming (empirical judgment), which is unfair to future generations (normative consideration).

When building political judgments aimed at guiding action here and now, one can hardly do otherwise than appreciate what is achievable and what the consequences of a given choice are likely to be given the knowledge we have about the world.¹ The interesting philosophical question is whether these kinds of consideration should weigh in the formulation of guiding normative principles themselves or should be considered apart. This is the core of the debate between partisans of idealism² and realism in political theory.

Three main views can be distinguished in this debate:

- Idealists believe that abstract moral principles (potentially independent from social facts) are central to normative political theorizing.

¹ Even deontologists will consider whether the choice for candidate A or B, policy x or y is likely to have the consequence of honoring the principles they believe in for deontological reasons.

² I will avoid using the terms ‘utopianism’ and ‘moralism’, which are usually opposed to political realism, given their (more) negative connotations.

- Non-ideal theorists focus on how best to pursue normative ideals in the world as it is (taking into account relevant social facts and the issue of non-compliance).
- Realists believe that political normativity should be kept distinct from abstract moral theorizing. In other words, political normativity should not be an application of abstract moral principles to non-ideal circumstances.

Among non-ideal theorists, it is then worth distinguishing between those who believe that there is a place for ideal theorizing in political theory, alongside non-ideal theorizing (Stemplowska 2008; Simmons 2010), and those who insist that ideal theorizing is pointless or misleading (Sen 2009).

At first sight, if a theorist is concerned with guiding political judgments, non-ideal or realist theorizing can seem more attractive, for they deliver normative conclusions that can be (more easily) applied in the existing, far-from-ideal world. I take this willingness to guide concrete political action to be the main reason for rejecting ideal theorizing. The aim of this article, however, is to argue that ideal theorizing might be considered valuable even by theorists moved by such a pragmatic concern (guiding political judgments) and to encourage the combination of ideal and non-ideal theorizing. In so doing, I do not aim to rebut political realism. People who strongly believe that political and moral normativity are of a different nature will not be convinced by the pragmatic idealism that I will advocate. The argument is rather targeted at people who are attracted by political realism or reject idealism (non-ideal theorists of the second category) because of the latter's lack of action-guidingness.

In the second section, I consider the main charge levelled against political realism – the status quo bias. I argue that this cost of realism will no longer seem worth paying once one realizes that concrete and relevant political judgments can also be reached by starting from ideal principles, and that being committed to abstract ideals does not entail misunderstanding the nature of politics. I thus defend a perspective which can be labelled 'pragmatic idealism' and outline a four-step method for proceeding from abstract moral principles to concrete political judgments as a way of combining ideal and non-ideal considerations, taking on board several realist warnings (section 3). For the sake of illustration, this method is applied to an example drawn from the ethics of migration. Drawing on this example, I then highlight the benefits of proceeding this way rather than disregarding ideal theorizing or adapting norms to reality (section 4), before making a conclusion.

2. The Critical Value of Ideal Theorizing

In this paper, I use 'pragmatism' in the sense of a theoretical attitude concerned with action. The purpose of moral theorizing, from a pragmatic perspective so defined, is *ultimately* to guide action. In contrast with Elizabeth Anderson's (2010) approach, for example, which consists in starting from concrete problems or situations of injustice, the pragmatic concern with guiding immediate action, in itself, does not settle the debate between partisans of ideal, non-ideal and realist theorizing. For in order to guide action, you can either think directly about principles applying in the world as it is (realist approach), or theorize based on concrete problems (Andersonian pragmatism), or think about ideal principles and their implications in the world as it is (what I will call 'pragmatic idealism'). The first two methods are more direct and avoid

second-best issues.³ These are two reasons why they might appear more appealing. Hence, the choice for an indirect and more hazardous method must be justified.

The main justification for pragmatic idealism, defined as the combination of high (or even detached) ideals with a willingness to guide action is to minimize the risks of a conservative bias in the formulation of our moral standards. Their bias in favour of the status quo is probably the main charge that has been levelled against realist approaches to politics, as appears clearly in the work of its critics (Carens 1996; Cohen 1994, 2011), but also its defenders, who have made great efforts to argue either that the status quo is not morally arbitrary (Sangiovanni 2008, p. 161) or that idealism can also be biased in its favour (Rossi 2016, 2019), or that realism need not be conservative (although many of its incarnations are) (Finlayson 2017; Rossi 2019).

One way moral standards can be biased in favour of the status quo is by being adapted to what seems achievable or feasible in the world as it is. By so doing, we risk legitimizing a state of affairs that might not be immutable. Consider the two following examples.

In debates about the appropriate standard of distributive justice, some might find demanding egalitarian principles unattractive because they are unlikely to be realized or even supported by a majority of citizens. Taking hostility to taxes as a fact, they might be more attracted by a sufficientarian principle requiring only bringing everyone above some threshold of material well-being – a demand well-aligned with a broadly accepted human right to a decent standard of living. Or they might argue that nobody should pay more than half of his or her total income in tax, as recommended by the British Commission on Social Justice, in which Bernard Williams, a well-known realist, took part in 1993-1994 (see Cohen 1994; Barry 2005, pp. 8f.). To be sure, there can be other reasons to be sufficientarian or to argue in favour of a cap on taxation. Yet idealists have good reasons to think that unless these norms are presented as non-ideal or adapted to superable constraints, the upshot of adopting a realist perspective is excessively conservative in that it legitimizes (some degree of) hostility to taxation.

Similarly, some people might be tempted to reject an open-borders ideal because it does not seem realistic. In a world of widespread xenophobia or at least in a world in which many people give more importance to the preservation of their national culture than to transnational solidarity, opening borders, following this perspective, would lead to social disaster. Again, there might be other reasonable reasons to oppose an open-borders regime, but defending a realist approach to this question without reference to more utopian ideals could be seen as legitimizing and ‘naturalizing’ an attitude – national preference – which is politically constructed and thus de-constructible (Axelsen 2013).

Thus, for people who believe that moral norms should not take our moral weaknesses – such as our reluctance to give up part of our gross income, or our tendency to favour our in-group – as insuperable, the realist approach might look insufficiently critical.

But why do some realists accept this conservative bias? The main reason is that they see ideal approaches as either *irrelevant* or *dangerous*. They can see them as irrelevant because politics is not comparable to a discussion in an ethics seminar. Whatever the fine-grained

³ In the real world, option C might be preferable to options A and B even if ideally A and B are preferable to C. I won't discuss second-best theories in this paper, but they add an additional reason to avoid turning fundamental moral principles into practical recommendations, a way of proceeding that I will reject. On this issue, see Goodin 1995.

arguments that philosophers can provide, political agents are moved by other considerations. Politics is about power and conflict, not moral principles (Mouffe 2005; Galston 2010, p. 395). Thus, ideal approaches misunderstand the nature of politics (Sleat 2016; Jubb 2017, p. 115), or so they argue. For the same reason, ideal approaches can also be seen as *dangerous* (Galston 2010, p. 401; Shapiro 2016), because by abstracting away from real politics, they run the risk of making inappropriate political prescriptions that turn a utopia into a nightmare – for example an ideal of global democracy into global tyranny. On this point, realists have history on their side: utopias have often led to dystopias in practice.

Idealists, however, should not feel their arguments have been rebutted by these criticisms. It might be true that many ideal theorists fail to appreciate political dynamics and therefore make irrelevant prescriptions. But it does not need to be so. An idealist might believe and argue that a just society should be completely different from ours and yet be hopeless about the prospects of realizing this ideal (Estlund 2014), precisely because she recognizes that politics is not responsive (enough) to moral arguments. Yet this raises a challenge for idealists who are not satisfied with a hopeless aspirational theory and who have the pragmatic aim to guide action. They will have to pay particular attention to the reality of politics when formulating *political* prescriptions based on their moral principles. In light of historical experiences, they should be very cautious, and well aware of second-best issues to minimize the dangerous effects of utopianism. It is the merit of the realist critique to point this out.

Thus, the realist critique is very important for *pragmatic* idealists. But if there is a way to take this critique on board while avoiding conservatism, as I shall argue, such a solution might be more attractive for those who see the status quo as deeply unjust.

Now, as I mentioned earlier, realist approaches to politics are not necessarily conservative (Finlayson 2017). In particular, when they take the form of ideology critique (Sangiovanni 2008, pp. 161f.; Prinz and Rossi 2017), they have the ability or even the mission to challenge the status quo. What is more, idealist approaches themselves are not immune to status quo biases (Rossi 2016; 2019). They can reflect vested interests or be the product of a conservative ideology. The question, then, is whether one of the two approaches is more likely to be biased than the other.

Rossi (2019) claims that a specific form of realism – as ‘ideology critique’ or as ‘genealogy’ – is more radical and less biased in favour of the status quo than both ideal and non-ideal approaches to normative political theory. The reason is that it sets for itself the mission to scrutinise the sources of ideologies and their genealogy as well as to identify their biases, which an ideal approach does not necessarily do.

Pace Rossi, I do not see why that form of realism should be considered as incompatible with ideal theory. It seems to me again that the realist critique can be taken on board by idealists – and should be if they want to minimize the risks of biases or conservatism. As we shall see in the next section, ideology critique could be a dimension of the search for adequate fundamental principles.

Yet the issue considered in this paper is not how to formulate fundamental principles; it is about translating these fundamental principles into political judgments. At that stage, ideology critique is not relevant anymore, and when building *political* judgments, we run a higher risk of conservatism by taking some properties of a political order – such as class struggle, bounded generosity, and moral disagreement – as insuperable or by denying that the

status quo is morally arbitrary (Sangiovanni 2008, p. 161). Hence, unless purely normative theorizing is rejected for other reasons that are beyond the scope of this paper,⁴ pragmatic idealism (including ideology critique) might appear more attractive for those who care about politically relevant theorizing yet want to avoid any conservative bias.

Should we nonetheless make a distinction between things that *can* change and others that will not (Galston 2010, pp. 401, 409)? For example, nationalism might be historically situated, constructed, and superable, but some degree of egoism will always inhabit human nature, hence morality should take into account the impossibility of altruism or be aligned with enlightened self-interest.

This sounds to me like an unnecessary pessimistic assumption. It is pessimistic in assuming that humans will always primarily be moved by their own interests. And it is unnecessary in the sense that we do not need to make such an assumption. As long as we keep sight of reality constraints (including limited generosity) when devising practical judgments aimed at guiding direct action, we can hold high moral standards that do not currently seem achievable. The value of doing so is to manifest the ambition to make humanity better if that proves possible, and by that move to avoid legitimizing current human weaknesses.

Such reasoning applies both to individual morality and to standards of collective organization. Thus, I see no reason to refrain from considering, for example, that a collective organization based on voluntary contributions would be more desirable, from a moral point of view, than one based on market rewards. Such an affirmation does not by itself entail that we should get rid of markets or turn to a communist society from one day to the other. Believing this amounts to misunderstanding the role of moral standards in ideal theorizing. Their aim is not necessarily to guide action in a direct way; they can also offer a critical look at existing institutions. This is, for example, what Joseph Carens (1981) did when imagining a market economy with equal post-tax wages and the changes in our moral motivations that would be required for such scheme to be viable. He was clearly not offering a blueprint for optimal taxation, but he was inviting collective critical reflection on individual motivations in market economies – the kind of reflection that was badly missing in the Commission for Social Justice mentioned earlier. As long as we maintain a clear distinction between what is morally desirable or just and what we ought to do or what the state ought to do⁵ (Cohen 2011, pp. 225f.; Estlund 2014, p. 121), high moral standards are useful – as critical tools.

These brief considerations are obviously not meant to make a decisive case against realist approaches to politics that are incompatible with idealism. Again, those who reject the distinction between normative and descriptive theorizing or the possibility or desirability of decontextualized normativity will not be convinced. The aim of this section was more modestly

⁴ Such as a rejection of a sharp divide between descriptive and normative theory or of decontextualized theorizing (see Prinz and Rossi 2017); or of ‘technocratic’ ambitions to make policy guidance (see Rossi 2019). The latter criticism is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the aims of pragmatic idealism. It does not aim at *imposing* any policy guidance, but more modestly at providing a philosophical perspective to contribute to public democratic deliberations about solutions to collective problems. Obviously, the whole citizenry and its representatives should have the final word about these issues, not political theorists.

⁵ For utilitarians, these distinctions will likely seem unnecessary, because the answer to the three questions might (but need not) be similar. The method that is laid out in the next section is probably more relevant for other approaches, whose fundamental principles do not directly guide action.

to show that for people who are concerned with the action-guidingness and political relevance of political theory, political realism is not the only available option – and it might even appear less desirable than pragmatic idealism given the critical value of high normative standards submitted to some sort of ideology critique (more on which later). Broadly similar arguments have already been made by critiques of political realism. What is lacking in the literature, though, is an explanation of the way ideal approaches can lead to concrete political judgments while incorporating relevant realist warnings.

3. From Morality to Politics

How do we move from high moral standards to concrete and plausible political judgments? By raising this question, I do not want to suggest that normative thinking always goes from abstract principles to concrete judgments. The way many people think – which was systematized by Rawls' method of reflective equilibrium – is by travelling back and forth between principles and intuitions or (considered) judgments about cases, whatever the starting point. Yet unless we always theorize by starting from concrete cases (which might threaten moral consistency), there will often be instances where we will have to move from moral principles to political judgments.

What is implicit in the question is a distinction not only between principles and judgments, but also between morality and politics. Distinguishing both realms, however, is consistent with believing that political philosophy involves the application of moral principles to politics – which most realists deny (Williams 2005; Sangiovanni 2008; Galston 2010). My view – shared by others (see Maynard and Worsnip 2018) – is that political judgments are more encompassing than moral ones. They need to take into account not only moral considerations, but also many factual assumptions about agents, markets, and social dynamics. In this regard, political normativity differs from strictly moral normativity, but it nonetheless incorporates guidance from the latter.

I would now like to offer a method suited to political normativity so conceived. If we want to maintain high moral standards detached from reality constraints and yet reach political judgments, we need to proceed through several steps and keep their separation in mind even though, in practice, we might be tempted to lump them together. Before going through these steps, note that political judgments can bear on candidates to elections or directly on policies. When judging candidates, some personality traits like fair-mindedness, sincerity, or leadership certainly matter (see Dovi 2007), but we should also take into account the values they affirm and their favoured policies. Because competing candidates can affirm broadly similar values, it is often their policy proposals that will be the salient and interesting criterion of differentiation. Hence, I will focus here on judgments about particular policies.⁶

To illustrate the method with a concrete application, let us imagine a strong cosmopolitan person reflecting upon the right immigration policy to defend in her political context – an affluent society facing immigration pressure and currently very selective about who is allowed in. One could define strong cosmopolitanism as the combination of a) the

⁶ This does not commit me to the belief that people actually choose representatives based on this criterion.

rejection of any special moral obligations to compatriots and b) the recognition of the morally arbitrary character of national borders. From this perspective, there is at least a *prima facie* preference for a world without borders (Carens 2013).⁷ Selecting the best immigration policy, however, requires more careful reflection. Opening borders might be a too straightforward application of the moral principle.

Step 1: Guiding principles

The first step is the *clarification and ordering of our guiding moral principles*. This is the usual playing field of competing theories of justice. Examples of abstract moral principles are the equal moral worth of all human beings, equality of opportunity, or freedom as non-domination. Ideally, when building a political judgment about a particular issue, we should first identify which moral principles are relevant to the issue at hand, isolate those we consider as valid, and try to order them. We do not however need a full theory of justice to proceed. Many of us have several normative intuitions that are not properly ordered and could clash. As highlighted by Rawls' reflective equilibrium, applying them to a case can actually help us in the process of clarification of our normative commitments.

At this stage, thus, the questions we should ask ourselves are of the following sort: Who is presumptively entitled to what? Are the interests of some affected parties more important than those of others? Ideally, what kind of social relations would we like to see prevail?

As I have suggested in the previous section, theories of justice might gain from incorporating at this stage some insights from realism as ideology critique, by engaging in ideology analysis (see Maynard 2017). What normative pragmatic idealism should take from ideology critique is not its rejection of moralism and precise policy prescriptions, but its attention to the sources of ideas and their place in historical contexts, with their specific power relations. The motivation should not be the Marxian view that moral ideals are entirely determined by prevailing socio-economic relations, as this would disqualify normative political theory altogether, but the awareness of the risks of biases. Thus, the theorist considering moral principles should pay attention to their potential ideological character: Whom do they benefit? Are they reinforcing or contesting existing privileges? Could they be the result of a positional bias (being a male, being white, being a citizen of a rich country, or having skills valued by the market) or a psychological motive such as system justification or just-world thinking (Maynard 2017, pp. 315f.)? In this respect, the realist legacy is a reminder that ideas do not come from nowhere; they are heavily influenced by one's position in power relations – as well as by other psychological factors.

Note as well that besides considerations of justice, other moral considerations can be taken into account in this first stage. When building political judgments, it will often be the case that justice is not the only value at stake. We might believe, following Rawls (1971, p. 5), that justice is the 'first virtue of social institutions', and yet this does not mean that it is the only one

⁷ Carens' book is a good example of a normative reflection well aware of its presuppositions and navigating explicitly and carefully between ideal and more realistic theorizing. The 'conventional view' that states have the right to exercise discretionary control over immigration is first assumed in order to make normative recommendations capable of guiding action in the world as it is. Then it is criticized from a more idealistic perspective in order to avoid legitimizing it in the eyes of readers.

or that it enjoys absolute priority over other values. Value pluralists believe that a plurality of values cannot be ordered once and for all. And some of them, like G. A. Cohen (2008), believe that including considerations of productive efficiency in the determination of principles of justice, as Rawls does with his difference principle, obscures the distinction between what a just society would look like, on the one hand, and the best way to pursue justice given what we know about agents' prevailing motivations on the other. Isolating justice from other values such as productive efficiency or community creates difficulties, as we shall see below, but value pluralism cannot be refuted on that ground only. Here, rather than taking sides in the monism vs pluralism debate, I want to make room for both in the method.

Let us now move back to our guiding example. Our strong cosmopolitan person might be committed to an ideal of global equality of opportunity⁸ because she believes it is the least likely to be biased by her position as highly skilled citizen of a rich country. She might also recognize a principle of sufficiency for all, stating that all humans should enjoy a decent standard of living, and give priority to this principle, with the thought that letting people starve is a worse injustice than depriving them of some less urgent opportunities. In addition to these principles of justice, other values are usually at stake in the issue of border policies,⁹ such as community or social cohesion. Inspired by Rawls' stance on justice as the first virtue, she might give priority to principles of justice over social cohesion.¹⁰

So far, she has not yet answered the questions of what can and should be done about immigration, but she should have a clearer view about what a just world would look like, which, as we shall see, is important.

Step 2: From principles to policies

The second step is the application of a principle, or a set of principles, to a given case, for example, applying the principles of global equality of opportunity and sufficiency to the issue of immigration. This requires *comparing different existing policies and anticipating their effects* in order to be able to evaluate them with our guiding principles. What is at stake here, following E. O. Wright's (2010, pp. 20f.) typology, is no longer strict moral desirability, but the effects and 'viability' of different considered policies.¹¹ The aim must be to assess whether a given policy will actually generate the expected consequences and whether it might produce unexpected consequences, perverse effects, or moral costs. From this perspective, competing policies can be assessed and ranked in light of their 'overall expected normative value' (Gilbert and Lawford-Smith 2012, p. 823).¹²

⁸ Whether opportunity for welfare or access to advantage, let us leave the question of the exact currency open. In any case, guided by ideology critique, she does not assume that people can usually be held responsible for their economic situation.

⁹ Sometimes, it is by applying a principle to a case that other values appear in the picture. Thus, moving back and forth between step 1 and 2 might be necessary, as is the case in reflective equilibrium.

¹⁰ This priority needs not be absolute. A massive loss in social cohesion might not be justified by a marginal gain in terms of justice.

¹¹ One could say that the *all-things-considered* desirability of a reform depends on its viability. Here, desirability means *strictly moral* desirability.

¹² While doing this, one should bear in mind second-best issues (see above) and not try merely to approximate the ideal.

When applying moral principles to a concrete case, one must try to bring into consideration all the relevant facts about the world we live in. This can be done at different levels of generality. One must first consider general facts about human behaviour and social dynamics (without taking them as insuperable), such as actors' reactions to taxation, public budgetary constraints, etc. Then, general policy prescriptions can be established. One example of such general policy prescription is Van Parijs and Vanderborght's (2017) plea for providing a basic income to all citizens of a political community. The authors do not consider a particular political community, because their argumentation is based on a moral principle (maximum real freedom) taken to be universally valid as well as general empirical observations about contemporary capitalist market economies and the failures of existing welfare states across the globe. However, in order to reach political judgments relevant to a particular context, one needs to take into account all the specificities of this context. When advocating basic income in their home country, for example, the authors would have to consider the peculiarities of the Belgian welfare state, including the existing unemployment benefits schemes and the particular tax system. Thus, there are different levels of generality involved in this second step. Some policies might have universal validity; others are likely to apply only in some contexts.

At all levels of generality, this step requires acquiring the relevant empirical knowledge. This is a task for which political philosophers might be insufficiently equipped and therefore invites interdisciplinary work (Swift and White 2008). It is nevertheless clear that philosophers have a role to play in these debates in connecting competing policies to moral principles and carefully assessing their expected normative value.

Going back to our migration example, it might be natural for our cosmopolitan to start by considering an open-borders policy, assuming that free migration, in particular when the lesser skilled are able to migrate, promotes global equality of opportunity (Milanovic 2016) and helps reduce global poverty (Oberman 2015). We will not examine these claims in detail here, as the purpose is merely illustrative, but we can give an idea of the kind of considerations that can enter the picture at this stage of reasoning:

- The effects of free migration on the economy of countries of origin ('brain drain' vs remittances). These potentially affect the desirability of pursuing global equality of opportunity through open borders.
- The effects on the welfare state in the host countries (the job-market integration of low-skilled immigrants and the challenge for social 'protection budgets').¹³ These affect the viability of the considered policy. Can we expect states to keep their borders open *and* offer social assistance to all of those who will not (immediately) find employment?

At this stage, clashes of values can also occur. Consider for example the tension between justice and social cohesion. You could think (rightly or wrongly) that open borders, having the potential to massively increase social diversity, would threaten social cohesion. And this can

¹³ Although under current regulations many immigrants find access to work and the general effect of migrations on the economy seems slightly positive (Docquier, Ozden, and Peri 2013), opening borders would allow entry to many more low-skilled people who do not speak the national language. As a result, the number of unemployed immigrants (and unemployed people in general) is likely to rise. And given that legal immigrants are usually entitled to some welfare benefits if they lack resources, migration will likely burden public budgets. This could be compensated by increased taxation, but states will at some point face limits in their capacity to collect new taxes, due to fiscal competition and citizens' hostility to taxation.

be problematic in two ways. Either, social cohesion is instrumental to the sustained pursuit of justice (see Banting and Kymlicka 2017), and damages to social cohesion then threaten the viability of pursuing justice through open borders. Or some degree of social cohesion is intrinsically valuable, and we are faced with a clash of values. As pointed out by several critics (Bocchiola and Zuolo 2013; Rossi 2016; Meijers and Vandamme 2019), G. A. Cohen, one of the key contemporary figures of value pluralism, did not provide a principled way to handle such trade-offs, leaving the task open to conflicting intuitions. A clear-cut way of arbitrating trade-offs of this sort would certainly be helpful when building political judgments. And this is the role of ‘rules of regulation’, or ‘fact-sensitive’ principles such as the difference principle, which offers one way of arbitrating justice vs productive efficiency trade-offs. Note however that the fact that clear solutions to trade-offs would be useful does not mean that it is always possible or that these trade-offs have a single correct solution. Political normative theorizing might just be more difficult than we would hope.

Thus, based on this, our cosmopolitan might be led to consider other policies, either more likely to further the prospects of justice or reducing conflicts of values. If the net effect of emigration is detrimental to countries of origin, our cosmopolitan will look at policies with the potential to reduce the sources of emigration, such as development aid or fair trade with poor countries. If, on the contrary, immigration from poor to rich countries is judged desirable and if the stability of the welfare state is considered as important for the prospects of justice,¹⁴ she will look at policies that maximize openness to immigration while reducing the pressure on social protection budgets. She would then face the ‘numbers vs rights trade-off’ (Ruhs and Martin 2008; Stilz 2010; Bertram 2019): the tension between a generous immigration policy and generous social protection for all, including legal immigrants.

Step 3: Envisioning alternatives

Although empirical considerations become more and more central when moving from moral principles to political judgments, philosophers still have an important role to play in the third step, which consists in expanding the normative horizon by *considering new alternative policies* (and their effects). This also matters for reducing the status quo bias.

We could imagine having considered all sorts of policies, existing or not, at step 2, which would make the third step redundant. However, the reason to start with the consideration of *existing* policies and to consider new ones in a separate step is the availability of social scientific evidence on which to base normative recommendations. The more evidence we have, the more we can be confident about the capacity of given policies to deliver the expected normative value. This is why step 2 has priority over step 3 – another insight from the realist critique of ungrounded utopias. Nevertheless, imagination matters if we are to select the policy most likely to bring about the desired results without incurring significant moral costs. And the more doubts generated at step two, the more important this additional step will be.

This step invites us to use our imagination: widening the perspective and looking for unexplored paths such as an unconditional basic income to tackle poverty and unemployment,

¹⁴ One could argue that preserving high levels of interpersonal redistribution matters for the plausibility of justice at a large scale. Furthermore, the degradation of social protection can be fertile ground for xenophobia (Rodrik 2018) – especially if it is presented as the price to pay for more immigration.

micro-credits to stimulate economic activity in poor countries, or permanent residence permits lotteries to reduce risks and inequality in migrations. This is how innovative ideas come to life.

At this stage, the question of feasibility is not central (more on this point later). What is important is to have a clearer picture of the diversity of alternatives that seems desirable and viable. The purpose is not only to guide immediate action, but also to set more ambitious goals for the future. A viable model of market socialism (see Roemer 1994), for example, will not help us answer the question of how our economy should be currently regulated, but it could inspire reforms aimed at increasing 'worker participation in their firms or facilitating the creation of 'worker cooperatives.

On the issue of immigration, in particular, expanding the horizon might be necessary given that electoral constraints currently reduce states' options to normatively unattractive ones. It is therefore essential to imagine all the policies that could reduce the need to emigrate or that would make populations of rich countries more hospitable to newcomers.

Inevitably, an important degree of uncertainty is likely to be part of this prospective reflection. It is often impossible to anticipate all the effects of a reform – particularly when it has never been implemented. Being aware of this difficulty, though, should invite caution – against naïve utopianism – rather than inhibit innovation.

Besides, alternatives to well-known policies need not all be utopian. Some degree of realistic utopianism might be necessary to maintain ambitious normative aspirations over the long term, but political theorizing should also contribute to identifying the most promising alternatives for the short term. Faced with the numbers vs rights trade-off, for example, our cosmopolitan might argue for restricting 'immigrant access to social protection by conditioning access to it upon a number of years of work or residence in the country. This would allow the amount of immigration to be increased without reducing the quality of social protection for domestic workers and the unemployed.

It is not my intention here to suggest that this is the best normative solution to this trade-off, but the point I want to make is that it is not at all implausible to imagine that a strong cosmopolitan might end up advocating a policy temporarily reducing the social rights of immigrants in order to absorb more immigrants as a result of a pragmatic pursuit of her normative ideals. The full-rights policy is only just and egalitarian in appearance: it guarantees equal rights to insiders at the cost of equal rights and opportunities between insiders and outsiders (Milanovic 2016). A prioritarian interpretation of the principle of global equality of opportunity might lead to a preference for migration rights for the many compared to equal rights for the few. Similarly, if this increases the chances of more people to reach the sufficiency threshold (be it through increased work opportunities or remittances), it might be justified by a prioritarian interpretation of the sufficiency principle.

This might look like a watering down one's initial normative commitments, but this is often the price to pay for political relevance. Pure idealists will attack such a policy proposal as discriminatory or as a source of domination and exploitation. Yet pragmatic idealism refuses the comfort of purely critical normative stances. And by setting for itself the goal to guide action (including immediate action), it accepts the discomfort of having to take social facts such as tax competition, people's reluctance to pay taxes, or widespread xenophobia as constraints that should be challenged theoretically, but that ought to be taken seriously in political practice.

Step 4: Considering political achievability

In line with this pragmatic willingness to guide immediate action, the fourth and final step is the *consideration of the political achievability of competing options*. The empirical knowledge required at this stage is the popular support for different desirable policies, their financial cost, and the likeliness of seeing them appear on the agenda of a major political party. Political achievability, thus understood, is distinct from feasibility in light of human nature and social dynamics, which are considered in steps 2 and 3.

Some will certainly argue that these political considerations come too late, that they should have been our starting point. William Galston, for example, suggests that social science should take the lead in identifying what is possible, and philosophy should select ‘what’s desirable from the feasible set’ (2010, p. 401). Similarly, what David Schmidtz calls ‘realistic idealism’ consists in studying ‘what should be in light of a sober assessment of what could be, here and now’ (2017, p. 131). Yet it seems to me that from a critical viewpoint, it is preferable to picture different possibilities first, and to consider their merits independently of their feasibility and political achievability. As a result, it will be clearer that the chosen policy is not necessarily the best, that it may involve concessions to reality.

Furthermore, picturing less achievable yet desirable and viable alternatives makes their realization more likely in the long run (Wright 2010, p. 23). Merely knowing that alternatives exist is important to avoid the status quo bias. The range of politically achievable policies is likely to be influenced by people’s knowledge of attractive alternative options. Thus, using one’s imagination before considering the best course of action is likely to open more avenues for desirable social change.

Another reason to consider political achievability after other feasibility constraints is that political constraints are more prone to change than human nature and social dynamics. A policy that does not enjoy majority support at some point in time might become very popular a few decades later. Thus, it makes sense for political theorists to *also* prescribe policies that are not immediately politically achievable, as argued above. The weight to be given to considerations of political achievability in normative political theory depends on the audience the theorist is addressing and on whether she wants to exercise influence in the short, medium, or long term.

Suppose our cosmopolitan wants to make recommendations about what kind of immigration policies her government should pursue. She would probably be led away from policies requiring massive transfers of money from rich to poor countries to reduce the need to emigrate. She might insist that this is required by justice, but nonetheless come with a proposal more likely to preserve the government’s electoral support. The choice for differentiated social rights might be reinforced by considerations of political achievability, given the assumption about people’s reluctance to increased taxation, their expected hostility to the general diminution of domestic social protection, and their (well-documented even if misplaced) fear of immigrants benefitting from welfare assistance without contributing to the economy (Duffy 2004).

Nevertheless, as already mentioned, the favourable judgment regarding differentiated social rights is not the only possible inference from the moral premises. Even accepting all the empirical assumptions outlined above, one might for example have doubts about the likeliness

of seeing the strong cosmopolitan version of differentiated social rights implemented in reality (another sort of achievability consideration). Or one might judge it more likely to see the policy ending up in a restriction of immigrants' social rights without a major opening of immigration policy (viability consideration). Once again, some degree of realism might be warranted here.

What is likely is that what is proposed as a pragmatic policy that could be pursued here and now will often be disappointing, judged from an abstract normative perspective, and that it will therefore face criticism from less pragmatically oriented scholars, politicians, and citizens. This is probably the reason why many theorists refrain from making concrete and plausible policy recommendations: out of fear of being criticized and judged insufficiently radical. There is a clear trade-off between sounding radical and being pragmatic, which many philosophers have resolved by giving up the latter part.

4. Clarifying Commitments and Disagreements

Once these four steps have been followed carefully, one can formulate a political judgment inspired by a moral principle or principles. The judgment, however, does not exactly *derive* from the principles. People could disagree at each step, for different reasons, and reach a very different judgment while starting from the same moral basis.

One reason is that empirical evidence is often contested and can result in different and conflicting predictive models. Additionally, those who believe in value pluralism must accept the possibility that different people sharing the same values will weigh them differently and disagree at the policy level for that reason. However, one might expect that two people starting from the same moral premises, ordering values in a similar way, and facing the same empirical evidence should reach identical political judgments.

Yet another possible source of reasonable disagreement is that the choice of a given path towards an ideal involves uncertain *strategic* decisions. The socialist movement, for example, has always been divided on the best political strategy: reforming or resisting capitalism. What would have happened if social democrats had refused the welfare state compromise, which had the effect of depoliticizing the working class (see Przeworski 1985)? These kinds of questions can be settled neither by philosophical speculation, nor by empirical evidence. Thus, two people starting from the same moral premises, ordering values in a similar way, and facing the same empirical evidence might still disagree about strategy and reach different political judgments. Nevertheless, one important benefit of this four-step method is to make it easier to locate political-normative disagreements, which matters for both academic debates and political deliberations.

The example from the ethics of migration highlights the fact that political disagreements can have an important variety of sources: opposed conceptions of justice; different ranking of values; competing assumptions about economic constraints, social dynamics, or electoral possibilities. Yet what frequently happens in political and academic debates is that people think they are disagreeing although they are not addressing the same question. For example, strong cosmopolitans usually refuse to consider selective immigration as just. This, however, does not mean that they would object to some form of it in practice. They will either disagree or agree with more pragmatic recommendations about immigration depending on whether the question is 'What would justice require, ideally?' or 'What should we do now?'

Similarly, carefully distinguishing fundamental principles from rules of regulation, following Cohen's (2008) suggestion, reduces the likeliness of seeing fundamental principles attacked on the basis of their alleged practical implications (as in Anderson 1999). Fundamental principles are distinct from political prescriptions.¹⁵ We need to take different steps to arrive at political judgments, and along the way other considerations might move us further from what could seem to be the direct implication of a principle (such as open borders for strong cosmopolitanism). Hence, carefully distinguishing the different steps of a normative reasoning is important to clarifying commitments and disagreements, and thereby to reducing misunderstandings and fruitless debates.

Another important conclusion is that the reasoning that brings a person to defend a given policy is an important matter, both philosophically and politically. Consider once again the example of differentiated social rights for immigrants. The same policy could be defended by people on the far right and people on the far left (although the former would probably want to reduce the number of immigrants as well as restrict their rights). The difference between the two positions, on this issue, might not be the *content* of the policy, but its *justification*. On one side, the justification is that compatriots matter more, morally, than foreigners, who are therefore not entitled to the same rights and opportunities; on the other side, it is that electoral and budgetary constraints create a trade-off whose least undesirable solution might be to temporarily reduce 'immigrant access to social protection.

Philosophically, the difference is clear: the two positions derive from opposite understandings of the scope of justice. And as Christopher Bertram (2018, p. 7) puts it, 'it distorts our moral understanding, specifically, our understanding of justice, to represent a pragmatic compromise with unjust attitudes [the unwillingness to pay more taxes] as exemplifying what justice itself demands.' Thus, the advantage of a pragmatic-idealist approach is that it makes the distinction easier: global freedom of movement combined with equal rights would be more just, but under specific circumstances, a more pragmatic compromise might be justified.

Politically, distinguishing the two positions matters as well, for only the strong cosmopolitan position engenders the moral discomfort that will motivate attempts to overcome or reduce the reality constraints on the pursuit of the ideal. The strong cosmopolitan defending differentiated rights will not stick to this policy proposal. She will also likely argue in favour of higher taxes, a higher budget for social protection, reduced international tax competition, global redistributions or other policies aimed at reducing the sources of immigration, a better social and economic integration of immigrants, etc.¹⁶ This is why it is important to make our fundamental moral beliefs stand out clearly, and why it matters to keep high normative ideals: to motivate the relentless efforts needed to improve our world despite reality constraints. Incidentally, maintaining a connection between concrete political engagement and high normative ideals might be especially welcome in a context of policy convergence between left and right if we want to maintain a specific ideological identity and distinguish it from political opponents (see Cohen 1994; Barry 2005).

¹⁵ This does not mean that they have no practical implications. On the conditions for principles to be action-guiding, see North 2016.

¹⁶ In order for them to find a job more quickly and thus to gain access to full rights without diminishing the welcoming capacity.

Finally, clearly picturing the different steps involved in political-normative thinking also highlights the *hypothetical* nature of political judgments. They are provisional conclusions based on moral premises and a series of empirical assumptions. If some of these empirical assumptions change, we should reconsider the judgment. This hypothetical status, it seems to me, appears less clearly when normative standards are adapted to reality constraints as is the case with realist approaches.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued against adapting our moral standards to what is perceived as feasible or what is likely to bring about desirable consequences under existing circumstances. The value of high moral standards is to make the moral flaws of our world appear more clearly and to critically assess existing institutions and attitudes. High standards allow us to avoid legitimizing existing injustices and not to fall in the trap of adaptive preferences.

I have also argued that one mission of political philosophy or theory should be to help build political judgments, guiding concrete actions in the world as it is. Therefore, it is not enough to defend abstract – and possibly hopeless – principles of justice. We need to be able to turn these into concrete political judgments by relying on social sciences and with an appropriate dose of realism about politics. The method appropriate to political-normative thinking that I advocate to this end comprises four steps:

1. *clarification and ordering of our guiding moral principles and values*
2. *anticipation of the effects of competing existing policies*
3. *consideration of new alternative policies and their effects*
4. *considerations of political achievability*

Although most theorists are likely to proceed through all these steps, be it in a disordered way, there is a widespread tendency in realist theorizing to mix some of these or to alter the guiding moral principles in light of practical considerations. I believe that this is a mistake¹⁷ and that two main gains can result from using the method of reasoning I advocate instead.

First, as I have argued in the third section, it is likely to clarify (and possibly reduce) philosophical and political disagreements by making it easier to identify whether people disagree on policies, fundamental principles, or intermediate norms such as rules of regulation.

Second, this method permits a more critical role for political philosophy. It does not have to choose between practical relevance and criticism or between pragmatism and idealism. It is possible and desirable for a theory to maintain high moral standards pushing humanity upwards and yet to play a useful social role in guiding political action in the world as it is – provided that moral standards are carefully scrutinized from an ideological analysis perspective and then articulated with empirical considerations along the lines suggested above. The level of ideality or realism of our discourses will then often depend on the audience we are addressing and the aims of our communicative act (Carens 2013, pp. 288f.; Valentini 2012, p. 660).

¹⁷ In contrast, revising one's general principles of justice in light of more concrete judgments, as suggested by the method of reflective equilibrium (Knight 2017), is not a mistake as long as normative principles remain strictly normative and are not adapted to fit reality better.

Thus, if the main values of political realism are its political relevance and its respect for the particular nature of politics, the cost of realism in terms of status quo bias is not worth paying because, as I have tried to show, idealism is not incompatible with relevance and does not forbid taking into account the peculiar ‘nature’ of the political (without assuming it to be immutable), as a game usually based on conflict, power, deception, and low moral motivation. Ideal principles can abstract away from this reality, but political judgments based on these principles will have to take this ‘nature’ into account if they are to be relevant.

Using this method also involves costs, to be sure. First, we certainly lose time in laying out our reasoning and explaining how we arrived at a specific political judgment while starting from a very remote principle. It seems to me however that all theorists will accept this cost. Second, and more importantly, we lose the immediate perception of a connection between the normative principles we recognize and the policies we advocate, possibly creating an unpleasant degree of cognitive dissonance (as is well illustrated by the immigration case discussed in section 2). Yet the noblest way of reducing this dissonance is to bring the world closer to our ideal, and not the other way around.

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