

## **A sense of “ideal theory”**

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*Abstract.* I present a sense of the term “ideal theory” based on Joseph Raz’s response to the situation of a lifeguard faced with three drowning on one side and two on the other and unable to save all. From what is of value, such a theory builds up a conception of a political state or an aspect of it which we have reason to realize, but without depending on the premise that it is possible for us to realize this.

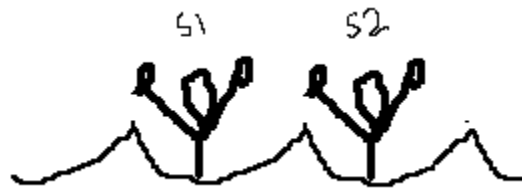
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*What about the two senses the Raz ghost found out,*

*Are you telling me that they do not count?*

What is ideal theory in political philosophy? A lifeguard is faced with three drowning on one side and two on another. They cannot save them all. What should the lifeguard do? (Three people, by the way, not three something else, three senses say!) According to one argument, they only have reason to do what they can do. So they have no reason to save all five. Three lives are worth more than two, other things being equal, so they should save the three. But Joseph Raz offers an alternative route to this conclusion (2003: 353). Each life is of value. So they have reason to save all five lives. They have reason to do the impossible. Should they just give up on listening to reason then? No. Partial completion is better than non-completion, says Raz, and the closer to total completion the better. So they should save the three, since that is closer to saving five.

From this alternative route, one can sense a sense of what an ideal theory is. An ideal theory argues for a claim about what the state has reason to do based on what is of value, but it is not committed to the premise that the state only has reason to do what it can do. The theory may recommend the impossible. In that situation, assuming the theory is right, Raz would say that partial completion is better than non-completion and the closer to total completion the better.



## Appendix

I anticipate someone's saying, "This is just covered by Laura Valentini's second sense of ideal theory: ideal theory does not take into account feasibility considerations whereas realistic theory is sensitive to them, so that a well-argued 'This is not feasible' counts as an objection to an instance of the latter." Perhaps, but I would ordinarily distinguish possible versus impossible from feasible versus infeasible, such as in an order of questions like this: "Is the plan possible or not? If so, is it feasible or not?" Does the concept of infeasible even apply with a "No" to the possibility question? It is a thorny issue whether the plan to grow wings and fly tomorrow is also infeasible, assuming it's impossible. (Personally, I think it would have made for neater history if the possibility-insensitive sense I have outlined emerged first, and then someone made a plea for the feasibility-insensitive sense as distinct.)

I wrote the words of the paragraph above based on Valentini's much-cited 2012 paper "Ideal vs. Non-Ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map," also used on courses. But she has a more recent paper on ideal theory, which I did not take into account. In it she writes:

There are two broad classes of feasibility-insensitivity for normative theories. First, there are theories whose prescriptions are genuinely impossible to realize. Second, there are theories whose prescriptions are unlikely to be acted upon. (2018: 671)

I fear someone's saying, "Look at that! Your possibility-insensitive sense is either not a novel contribution or so minimally novel, 99.9% of the credit should go to Valentini!" Leaving aside the issue of credit distribution on this occasion, I think one would need to introduce the possibility-insensitive sense as something distinct. Probably there can be a nice settled map for the average student one day, and surely this sense would be part of it. (Also I think the example from Raz is probably useful in this topic. Valentini cannot seem to find a transparent case of being insensitive to possibility. 2018: 671-672.)

## References

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