

Not in the literature: an ideal political theory tutorial

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Abstract. I present a fictional and somewhat unpleasant tutorial. In it a use of the term “ideal political theory” is connected with the reflective equilibrium method: an ideal theory requires no adaptation of specific moral judgments to fit with the theory. I have not been in a tutorial closely resembling this, I should say.

Draft version: Version 1 (November 2nd 2022, online on 4th)

Are they taking the possibility-insensitive sense away

Which was my child for but a day?

TEACHER: This week’s political philosophy class, sorry, political theory class, is on ideal political theory. Does anyone know why we use this term “ideal political theory”?

STUDENT 1: Is it because political theory is political philosophy?

TEACHER (*puzzled*): No.

STUDENT 2: Is it because political theory is the ideal kind of philosophy? The other kinds are too abstract and empirical research is too, like, too... empirical.

TEACHER: I can see a person might say that, but that isn’t reason, a reason, in the literature.

STUDENT 3: You know there’s this reflective equilibrium procedure we’ve learnt about?

TEACHER (*puzzled*): Yes...

STUDENT 3: Last week.

TEACHER: And...

STUDENT 3: It says if you have some general principles and they entail half your moral judgments about specific situations, then it's not good enough, but if it entails almost all, then you can just abandon the ones which don't fit.

TEACHER: So...

STUDENT 3: So, er, an ideal political theory doesn't require that. Its general principles just fit with all the specific judgments. Does Rawls even ask us to abandon a judgment?

STUDENT 2: It could be stressful abandoning a moral judgment. How do you even do that? "That's okay now, being racist is okay now."

TEACHER: I can see why you would use "ideal political theory" for that, that concept, but that's not why it's used, not in the literature anyway. Has anyone done the reading?

STUDENT 4: Bernard Williams says that, before, people used to say that ideal political theory does not take into account what is possible, given the laws of nature, whereas realistic theories do. But he introduces this other sense, in which an ideal political theory does take into account restrictions of possibility but not feasibility.

TEACHER: I don't think that was Bernard Williams.

STUDENT 4: Is it not Williams?

STUDENT 1: What does "feasibility" mean anyway? These philosophers should talk in normal language. Does anyone use that word?

STUDENT 3: It's the f-word!

TEACHER: I think "feasible" means practical.

STUDENT 1: Why did he not just say that then?

TEACHER: It can also signify possible.

STUDENT 4: Infeasible is different from impossible, according to Williams. Feasible and infeasible both presuppose possibility. Or maybe that's Strawson, Strawson senior.

STUDENT 1: I think if you read Rawls carefully you can understand him, but even if you read Williams carefully you can't.

STUDENT 4: Did your father tell you to say that? Miss, how did you get here by the way?

TEACHER: I am on a teaching-scholarship, while doing my PhD, teaching-and-research focused scholarship.

STUDENT 3: But this is, like, Bernard Williams country, isn't it?

TEACHER: I suppose so. With its famous common sense.

STUDENT 1: Miss, can you just tell us what ideal theory is *in the literature*?



References

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