

AGAINST IDEAL GUIDANCE

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Abstract. This paper demonstrates that political ideals contribute nothing to our understanding of the normative principles we should implement amidst unjust or otherwise nonideal circumstances.

Let a “political ideal” be a set of normative principles that specify the broad contours of a fully just state of affairs. Following Rawls (1999*b*), political philosophers frequently contend that political ideals provide normative guidelines for our efforts to address injustice amidst unjust or otherwise nonideal circumstances (Gilabert, 2012; Robeyns, 2008; Simmons, 2010; Valentini, 2009). Accordingly, normative political philosophers have largely become engrossed with analyzing political ideals. This preoccupation has come under fire recently (Farrelly, 2007; Mills, 2005; Sen, 2009; Wiens, 2012). In this paper, I vindicate the critics, demonstrating that political ideals are useless — unnecessary and redundant — for specifying the normative principles we ought to implement in unjust or otherwise nonideal circumstances.

1. AN ARGUMENT AGAINST IDEAL GUIDANCE

Let’s identify possible worlds by their constitutive normative principles. Suppose we can rank worlds according to the extent to which they realize our fundamental moral and social values (e.g., liberty, equality, community, security). Now partition the set of worlds into feasible worlds, denoted F , and infeasible worlds (how we define the relevant notion of feasibility is immaterial). Let OF denote the morally optimal feasible world, i.e., the feasible world that best realizes our fundamental values. Suppose we have a basic duty to realize OF ; that is, we have a duty to implement the normative political principles that constitute OF . Finally, let PI denote the world constituted by our ideal political principles — that is, the world at which the constitutive principles of a fully just society are fulfilled.¹

There are three cases to discuss:

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¹ I treat OF and PI as single worlds for ease of exposition. We could treat them instead as sets of worlds by complicating things slightly.

- (1) the political ideal is not feasible ($PI \notin F$);
- (2) the political ideal is the morally optimal feasible world ($PI \in F$ and $PI = OF$);
- (3) the political ideal is feasible but is not the morally optimal feasible world ($PI \in F$ and $PI \neq OF$).

I now show that, in all three cases, an analysis of PI is unnecessary and redundant in our reasoning to the normative principles we should implement (i.e., the principles that constitute OF). I deal with cases (1) and (3) together before turning to (2).

If (1) or (3) holds, then $PI \neq OF$; that is, PI 's constitutive principles are not identical to OF 's constitutive principles. Since we have a basic duty to realize OF , we should not implement the principles that constitute PI . (If (1) holds, then, by assumption, we *cannot* implement PI 's constitutive principles.) Moreover, there is no reason to suppose a priori that PI and OF are constituted by relevantly similar principles; only a comparison of PI and OF will permit us to determine their degree of similarity. Thus, we cannot derive OF 's constitutive principles from an analysis of PI . Finally, analyzing OF is sufficient to characterize the principles we should implement. Thus, an analysis of PI 's constitutive principles is superfluous in our reasoning to OF 's constitutive principles. Thus, if (1) or (3) holds, an analysis of PI is unnecessary and useless for characterizing the nonideal normative principles we ought to implement.

If (2) holds, then PI 's constitutive principles are identical to OF 's constitutive principles. Whether an analysis of PI provides useful normative guidelines for our efforts to address injustice amidst nonideal circumstances depends on whether an analysis of PI plays an essential or non-redundant role in our reasoning to OF 's constitutive principles.

Suppose we analyze PI independently of identifying OF ; that is, we derive PI 's constitutive principles from predominantly moral considerations, only later asking whether realizing PI is feasible and how it compares with other feasible alternatives. There is no reason to suppose a priori that $PI = OF$. To determine whether $PI = OF$, we must identify OF and compare the two. That is, to determine whether $PI = OF$, we must undertake the empirical analyses required to determine whether PI is feasible (to rule out case 1); we must also identify alternative feasible worlds and rank them according to their moral optimality (to rule out case 3). Only once we've done this, can we determine whether $PI = OF$. If $PI = OF$, we should implement PI 's constitutive principles. But an independent analysis of PI plays an unnecessary and redundant role in characterizing the normative principles we ought to implement. Analyzing alternative feasible worlds and characterizing OF is sufficient for identifying the principles we ought to implement. Thus, the fact that $PI = OF$ —the fact that the principles we ought to implement are identical to

those that constitute an independently identified political ideal — is superfluous in our reasoning. We can dispense with an independent analysis of *PI* (and save ourselves the trouble of having to determine whether it is feasible).

Suppose we start by analyzing *OF*; that is, we canvass the feasible worlds and determine which one is morally optimal. This is sufficient to characterize the principles we ought to implement. There is no reason to determine whether $OF = PI$; thus, there is no reason to undertake an independent analysis of *PI*. Again, an analysis of *PI* is superfluous in our reasoning to the principles that constitute *OF*.

In sum, an analysis of a political ideal contributes nothing to our efforts to identify the normative principles we should implement in unjust circumstances like our own.

2. TWO OBJECTIONS

Two obvious objections arise. The first states that the phrase “political ideal” is meant to pick out the morally optimal feasible world; i.e., $PI = OF$ by definition.² The second states that political ideals provide the evaluative standard by which we rank feasible worlds (cf. [Simmons 2010, 34](#); [Valentini 2009, 333](#)). I take these in turn.

If “political ideal” refers to *OF* by definition, then an analysis of *PI* is an attempt to characterize *OF*’s constitutive principles. If this is so, then philosophers have chosen an unreliable and inefficient methodology for specifying the principles we ought to implement. As I noted above, independently analyzing *PI* is unnecessary and redundant for characterizing *OF*’s constitutive principles. There’s simply no way to tell whether an analysis of *PI* characterizes *OF*’s constitutive principles until we situate *PI* among the feasible alternatives. But, then, we might as well dispense with an independent analysis of *PI* and go straight to identifying and ranking feasible worlds (and characterizing their constitutive principles). The mere fact that ideal principles constitute a fully just society does nothing to recommend them as normative guidelines for our efforts to address injustice amidst our decidedly nonideal circumstances.

According to the second objection, a political ideal provides the standard by which we rank feasible worlds. If this is so, then an analysis of *PI* plays an essential role in our reasoning to the normative principles we should implement. Presumably, in saying that “a political ideal provides an evaluative standard”, the objector means that feasible worlds must be ranked according their similarity to *PI*. But “similarity” can take on at least two different senses here. First, let’s say a world *w* is *content-wise similar* to *PI* insofar

² This is suggested by Rawls’s phrase “realistic utopia” (1999a, sec. 1), which many philosophers use to characterize the point of analyzing political ideals.

as the content of w 's constitutive principles resembles the content of PI 's constitutive principles (whatever "resemble" might mean). Second, let's say w is *value-wise similar* to PI insofar as the degree to which w manifests our fundamental moral and social values approximates the degree to which PI manifests those values.

If we are to rank feasible worlds according to their content-wise similarity to PI , then we need an analysis PI 's constitutive principles. But we shouldn't rank feasible worlds in this way. Lipsey and Lancaster's (1956) "general theory of second best" demonstrates that, if one of the ideal's constitutive principles is unsatisfied as specified, then the next best world is not necessarily constituted by the remaining ideal principles nor by any principles whose content resembles that of ideal principles. This is because our normative political principles are sensitive to various interdependencies among our fundamental values (cf. Goodin, 1995). For example, our valuation of individual freedom (however conceived) likely depends on the extent to which other values are manifest, such as physical security or community. Relatedly, the extent to which individual freedom is manifest might depend on the extent to which we are physically secure or live within a supportive community. When (1) we are committed to realizing more than one fundamental value, (2) our fundamental values are interdependent in either of these ways, and (3) these interdependencies are not linear, the theory of second best shows that we can't straightforwardly estimate how second best principles must deviate from ideal principles. Put differently, content-wise similar worlds are not necessarily value-wise similar. Further, the point of analyzing political ideals is ostensibly to make more determinate the social and political implications of our commitment to certain abstract and vaguely specified moral and social values. Put simply, we are ultimately concerned with the extent to which our fundamental values are realized. Since content-wise similar worlds are not necessarily value-wise similar, we should not rank feasible worlds according to their content-wise similarity to PI .

The objector might now assert that we still require an analysis of PI to identify the fundamental values by which we judge value-wise similarity. But this gets things backward. Our analysis of PI does not tell us which fundamental values we should hold. Our identification of PI as the ideal presupposes an antecedently chosen set of fundamental values against which we judge alternative worlds (compare Rawls's remarks in his 2001, sec. 2). PI might be the world that most fully realizes our fundamental values. But, for all that, we do not need a characterization of PI 's constitutive principles to rank feasible worlds according to the extent to which they realize our fundamental values. All we need is a set of fundamental values by which we rank alternative sets of principles. Given this, an analysis of PI 's constitutive principles is unnecessary for ranking feasible worlds.

AGAINST IDEAL GUIDANCE

I conclude that political ideals are unnecessary and redundant for our reasoning to the normative principles we ought to implement amidst unjust or otherwise nonideal circumstances. This does not imply that political ideals are useless for other purposes — for instance, for motivating agents to pursue institutional reforms that can lead to improvements from the standpoint of justice. So we may yet have reason to analyze political ideals. But identifying normative standards for addressing injustice in nonideal circumstances like ours is not one of them.

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