

The Best and the Rest
Idealistic Thinking in a Non-Ideal World

David Wiens

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Prefatory Notes

- Many of the ideas in this book were presented in fledgling form at various annual meetings of the American Philosophical Association (2018, 2020), the American Political Science Association (2018), and the PPE Society (2022, 2023), at the inaugural *Political Theory in/and/as Political Science* conference at McGill (2018), and departmental workshops at UC Santa Barbara and Stanford (both in 2018) and Duke (in 2023). For valuable comments and discussion in connection with these presentations, special thanks go to Arash Abizadeh, Avi Acharya, Vincent Arel-Bundock, Nathan Ballantyne, Sam Bagg, Jacob Barrett, Jeff Carroll, Bill Clark, Chetan Cetty, Brian Coyne, Paige Digesser, Kevin Elliott, Sean Ingham, Kathryn Joyce, Alex Kirshner, Ben Laurence, Jacob Levy, Ted Lechterman, Christian List, Jihyun Jeong, Jane Mansbridge, Alison McQueen, Andrew Norris, Josh Ober, Geneviève Rousselière, Geoff Sayre-McCord, Melissa Schwartzberg, Shanna Slank, Rogers Smith, Julia Staffel, and Eric Stein (with apologies to others whose names I have forgotten).
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- I still need to add and/or check references to the existing literature in places, many of which I have flagged with the marking (*CITATIONS*).
- I wish to acknowledge that the main title comes from David Estlund: he circulated a predecessor of his article “Just and Juster” (Estlund, 2016) under the title “The Best and the Rest”.

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CHAPTER 1

Idealistic Political Theory What to Expect in this Book

Imagine you have enrolled in an introductory political theory course. This week's lecture is focusing on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's thoughts about legitimate political authority in *On the Social Contract*.¹ You learn that, for Rousseau, the exercise of political authority is legitimate only if it is consistent with individuals' freedom; or, as he puts it, political authority is legitimate only if it "defends and protects with all common forces the person and goods of each associate," while "each one. . . nevertheless obeys only himself and remains as free as before" (SC i.6). The demand to leave each member of society "as free as before" seems especially obscure. The professor directs your attention to Rousseau's notions of "civil liberty" and "moral liberty" (SC i.8), explaining that a legitimate authority is one that acts on the basis of civil laws that express the will of each member of society.

But this solution raises a question, which is obvious once we appreciate the need to establish political authority in the first place. As you learned in previous lectures, the need for political authority arises because people disagree, often sharply, about matters of common concern — for example, how material resources should be distributed among members of the group, how tasks associated with cooperative endeavors should be assigned, and so on (SC ii.1). It is easy enough for you to see how the enactment and enforcement of civil laws can settle these disagreements but, given divergent interests and opinions, it seems

¹Rousseau 2019. I cite Rousseau's text using lower case Roman numerals to designate the book and Arabic numerals to designate the chapter.

that such a solution must endorse the interests of some members of the group at the expense of others'. How, then, can a society be constituted by laws that *each* member of a group can see as expressing his or her *own* will? The professor directs your attention to Rousseau's notion of a "general will," summarizing it thus: The general will expresses a conception of the common good to which each member subscribes when they reflect on their society from the perspective of an impartial citizen (as opposed to the perspective of their particular interests as a private individual) (SC ii.1, 3–4). When civil laws reflect this shared conception of the common good, then each member of the group can see them as expressing his or her own will *as a citizen*. When members of the group obey civil laws that reflect their shared conception of the common good, then each one will obey laws "one has prescribed for oneself" (SC i.8). Thus, a society constituted by laws that reflect a shared conception of the common good is one in which political authority resolves disagreements in a manner consistent with the full freedom of each citizen.

While you now feel like you grasp the meaning of Rousseau's principle of legitimate authority, it still seems quite abstract. What would a society that realizes this principle look like? In particular, how might a group of individuals with conflicting interests identify a shared conception of the common good? *How, if at all, might this principle apply to our present political context?* To answer these questions, the professor turns to the institutions Rousseau says could realize his principle in practice. In his view, the general will on any issue is identified by taking a vote within an assembly of all citizens. But not just any voting procedure will work — he has something specific in mind. To begin with, the issue under consideration by the citizen assembly must be general in its content and scope, abstracting from any particular case involving particular individuals (SC ii.6). Second, since the general will is the will of the entire citizen body, *all* citizens must be present at the vote (SC iii.15). Third, citizens must make up their own minds about how to vote and must not vote as members of political groups (SC ii.3). Fourth, and crucially, citizens' votes must reflect their opinions about whether the legislation under consideration advances the common good, not their opinions about whether the legislation advances their private interests as individuals (SC iv.1–2; cf. ii.3). Roughly speaking, the general will is identified with the outcome of majority voting under these conditions.

Once we have identified the general will, you wonder, how does a society ensure that it is implemented? An assembly of the entire citizen body may be able to identify the general will but it cannot effectively implement the general will (SC iii.1, 4). How do we make sure that a government comprising some but not all citizens implements laws in accordance with the general will instead of advancing their own interests? The professor calls time on the class, promising to

take up these questions in a future lecture.

As you walk away, trying to tie all these threads together, you can't help but wonder: *How do Rousseau's ideas help us think about legitimate political authority here and now, in our present day political context?* The political society he describes seems so at odds with apparently realistic expectations for political behavior and institutions: regular meetings of the entire citizenry to make legislative decisions; citizens who set aside their interests as private individuals when voting on legislation; a political process devoid of parties or other special interest groups; laws that reflect a shared conception of the common good despite individuals' divergent interests and opinions; a government that faithfully implements the legislative decisions of its citizens. Such a society seems so *idealistic*. Is Rousseau's vision of political society merely a utopian fantasy?

Anyone familiar with Rousseau's ideas will recognize this line of questioning. Anyone familiar with the discipline of political theory will recognize these questions as invoking a recurring theme. Throughout history, political thinkers have used stylized descriptions of political societies to address questions about politics. Often enough, these models of society appear *idealistic* in that they depict modes of social and political organization that seem incompatible with what we, based on our observations, have come to regard as typical human behavior. If we want to think clearly about politics in the real world, what, if anything, can we take away from the idealistic models of society we find littering the history of political thought?²

People tend to answer this question in one of two apparently opposing ways. *Supporters* think idealistic models are a natural, and perhaps necessary, element of political thought. They have a strong intuition that we cannot think clearly about how we should organize political life without any sense of which arrangements would be best. This is not (yet) to say that models of ideal societies are straightforward guides for thinking about which political arrangements we should implement; real-world conditions complicate their application to real-

²The issue I am pointing to is more general than this question suggests, since political theorists are not the only ones who think with idealistic models of society. Some social scientists do so as well; a classic example is economists' analysis of models of perfectly competitive markets to establish propositions about the relationship between market transactions and economic efficiency (e.g., Debreu, 1959). Political activists often appeal to idealistic models too. A recent example is Black Lives Matter activists' appeals to visions of a society without police forces and prisons to muster public support for abolishing these institutions. See Davis 2011; Shelby 2022 for recent discussions; see Young 1990; Ypi 2012 for more general discussions of the links between social activism and normative ideals. So we could pose a more general question: *What should we make of the idealistic models that pervade our social and political thought?* While I suspect my arguments apply beyond political theorists' uses of idealistic models, I focus on these to keep my inquiry manageable and because I know these examples best.

world arrangements. But supporters insist that our thinking about real-world politics is nonetheless enhanced by studying idealistic models of society. Some think that such models can expand our sense of what is possible — by depicting forms of social and political organization not yet considered, or by showing how some latent modes of human behavior could become manifest by altering prevailing institutions. Some think that idealistic models serve some kind of normative purpose — for example, by depicting a target for our efforts to reform existing institutions and practices, or by setting a benchmark against which to evaluate institutions and practices. And some think that idealistic models serve to clarify the meaning of normative terms such as “justice,” or to expose our reasons for ascribing certain meanings to these terms.

Skeptics dismiss idealistic models as an unproductive and perhaps pernicious diversion. While they agree with supporters that our reflections on real-world political arrangements should be informed by a sense of how things could be otherwise, they think our attention should be limited to practicable possibilities. Some argue that idealistic societies are too far removed from the real world — too otherworldly — to help us think about what is possible or about what we should do; some argue that models of idealistic societies muddle and mislead our thinking about what we should do or about the meaning of normative terms because they obscure too many important features of the real world. Skeptics thus conclude that we should dispense with idealistic models because they distort rather than clarify our reflections on real-world political arrangements.

Should we support the use of idealistic models in our thinking about real-world political arrangements? Or should we follow skeptics in dismissing them as useless or worse? In fact, both sides get something right. Putting things quite roughly for now, I will show why we should follow skeptics in dismissing idealistic models as useless for thinking about *normative* matters — for prescribing goals for political action, for providing standards for distinguishing rightful social and political arrangements from wrongful arrangements, or for providing general principles for evaluating a broad array of social and political possibilities. I will also show that we should support the use of idealistic models for thinking about *conceptual* matters — in particular, for interpreting and operationalizing the conceptual content of terms such as “equality” and “freedom,” which we often use to describe and evaluate social and political arrangements.

It will be a while before we can strengthen our grip on what these claims mean, let alone why we should accept them. I will preview some of the important ideas in a moment. Before I do, let me say something about what is at stake to motivate you to follow along. While idealistic models of society are a recurring feature of political thought — Rousseau’s is just one example among many — skepticism is the prevailing sentiment. At least in the Anglo-American world and perhaps

more broadly, the dominant mode of political inquiry within academic and policy circles displays a near-exclusive focus on quantitative data and statistical analyses in search of the causal effects of political behavior and institutions. This is typically combined with skeptical impatience with “speculative” political thought — basically, any mode of inquiry that is judged to stray too far from the facts, with “the facts” roughly corresponding to the universe of observations that can be quantified and analyzed using an ever-expanding set of statistical techniques. Unsurprisingly, then, we often find thinkers who investigate idealistic models relegated to the margins of academic and public political discourse (although to a somewhat lesser extent in the latter case). While we should be skeptical about the value of idealistic models for some purposes — that’s one of my claims in this book — the prevailing skeptical impatience naively dismisses idealistic models as useless for *any and all purposes*. By showing how idealistic models can be useful for thinking about conceptual matters, I will show, against the prevailing skepticism, why they play an integral role in scientific political inquiry and public political discourse. We cannot credibly assess any scientific hypothesis or public pronouncement unless we understand the conceptual content of the terms used to express their component ideas. So, put simply, attending to conceptual matters is essential to fruitful scientific inquiry and public discourse. I will show how idealistic models (such as Rousseau’s) can be useful tools for exploring, interpreting, and testing candidate answers to questions about the conceptual content of the terms we use to express our ideas about politics. In so doing, I will show how investigating idealistic models can play an integral role in scientific political inquiry and public political discourse.

To ward off naive skepticism, however, we must concede skepticism where it is warranted. So we must check unwarranted confidence in the value of idealistic political thought. Political theorists have vigorously pushed back against their marginalization within the discipline of political science, often highlighting their contributions to important conceptual and normative issues.³ To defend the relevance of idealistic political thought in particular, political theorists have overwhelmingly focused on demonstrating its value for our thinking about the kinds of policies or institutions we should adopt to address the myriad injustices we find in the real world. But, on this point, political theorists have claimed too much. While much skepticism about using idealistic models as a basis for recommending real-world interventions is vague and impressionistic, I will show it is nonetheless warranted. Some political theorists, perhaps sensing that this skepticism is warranted, have suggested that idealistic political thought is instead

³See, among others, Grant 2002; Saxonhouse 2004; Shapiro 2002; Smith 2000; Warren 1989; Wolin 1969.

useful for clarifying and refining our understanding of the conceptual content of our normative terms. Yet these replies are vaguely expressed: they do not clearly and concretely distinguish the (warranted) use of idealistic models to think about conceptual matters from the (unwarranted) use of idealistic models as a basis for normative recommendations. While suggestive, they are insufficient to check unwarranted confidence and, in turn, insufficient to ward off naive skepticism. What we need is a defense of the thought that idealistic models are useful for thinking about conceptual matters that allows us to clearly and definitely see how we can separate two apparently inseparable ideas: how, on one hand, using idealistic models to address conceptual questions contributes to our thinking about real-world politics without, on the other hand, providing a basis for recommending interventions to address real-world injustices. I present such a defense in this book.

At this point, some might express impatience with the kind of abstract methodological inquiry I have just sketched. One motivation for such impatience might be the thought that political theorists should avoid thinking about how to think about politics and just get on with thinking about politics. Or perhaps it is the thought that methodological insights are best achieved by simply doing political theory rather than by abstract reflection on the practices of political theory. I confess sympathy with these thoughts and, so, with the impatience they provoke. I agree that simply doing political theory is usually the best source of helpful methodological insights, and that methodological reflections undertaken for their own sake are liable to lapse into academic naval-gazing, leading to “solutions in search of a problem.” Nonetheless, I think there is value in systematizing the methodological insights we gain from doing political theory. Methodological reflection concerns the proper application of the tools and techniques one uses for articulating and solving problems. Regardless of discipline, we are all more effective thinkers when we use the methods at our disposal with a nuanced understanding of their strengths and limitations.

Systematic methodological reflection can also help to check both unwarranted skepticism and unwarranted confidence about the nature and value of political theorists’ contributions to political inquiry. Political theorists are liable to misrepresent the nature and value of their contributions if they misunderstand the strengths and limitations of the tools at their disposal. This kind of misrepresentation is on full display when it comes to idealistic political thought, and I suspect it is at least partly responsible for recurring skepticism about the relevance of much normative political theory for broader political discourse. As we will see in later chapters, political theorists by and large defend idealistic political thought by arguing that we need it to guide our thinking about how to improve upon the status quo. But it is very hard for many people to see how

political thought that appears divorced from reality can guide real-world action. Political theorists' initial answers to this skepticism are superficially plausible, but they often become strained under scrutiny. Perhaps these answers can ultimately withstand this scrutiny but I suspect that the final product will be a series of *ad hoc* adjustments that are too unwieldy to hold together in a coherent whole. This imposes a significant cost: if the ideas motivating skepticism about the value of idealistic political thought come together in a way that appears simpler and more natural than political theorists' best defenses, then many people will remain persuaded that idealistic models contribute little to our thinking about politics, even if much of this skepticism is unwarranted.

I present a coherent framework to think about the value of idealistic models, which can help us better understand their strengths and limitations as tools for thinking about politics. This view, in turn, allows political theorists to more clearly understand how their idealistic models contribute to academic political inquiry and public political discourse. This comes with a substantial payoff: theorists can confidently declare that idealistic models make integral contributions to political inquiry and discourse without having to evade or defeat — indeed, while accepting — many of the skeptical intuitions that motivate resistance to idealistic political thought. What's at stake, then, is an understanding of the value and purpose of idealistic models that allows us to navigate between naive skepticism and naive optimism about the value of idealistic political thought.

1.1 Subject and scope: a first look

Suppose we are thinking about some normative matter: which policy we should implement, which kinds of institutions we should aim to establish, which patterns of behavior are better than others, and so on. We are faced with various competing claims about these matters, which diverge in their normative implications. After some reflection, we accept some of these and reject others. Suppose we want to explain why we accept the claims we accept and reject the claims we reject. Here, in this context, is a preliminary statement of the two claims I want to establish:

The Skeptical Claim. Idealistic models of society do not supply reasons to accept any particular normative claim over alternatives.⁴

⁴For reasons that will become clear later, it is more accurate to say I will establish a *Skeptical Conjecture*. In effect, I will show that political theorists bear a substantial burden of proof to show that a more precise version of this *Skeptical Claim* is false; moreover, I will show that they cannot discharge this burden while adhering to the standard practices of normative political theory (although that is not to say they have no way to discharge it). I conclude from this point that we should accept the *Skeptical Claim* as a basic methodological assumption — we should treat it as

The Supportive Claim. Idealistic models of society can help us interpret and operationalize the conceptual content of normative claims; this, in turn, helps us think more clearly about our reasons for accepting a particular claim.

Let's return to Rousseau to make these two claims less abstract. Rousseau presents us with a principle of political legitimacy—*A political society should be based on laws that each citizen can see as reflecting a shared vision of the common good*—and a model of a society that instantiates a realization of this principle. The *Skeptical Claim* implies that, even if we agree that it depicts an *ideal* society—a best-case scenario—Rousseau's model does not supply any reason to accept his principle as normatively authoritative for our thinking about politics. Suppose we accept Rousseau's principle because, owing to the fact that it reflects a normatively significant feature of his model, we take it to reflect our reasons for thinking that such a society is ideal in some sense. I will show, however, that the reasoning we might use to explain why we designate Rousseau's model society as ideal can support designating an alternative model, with conflicting features, as ideal too. But then our reasons for accepting Rousseau's principle also justify accepting a competing principle, which reflects the normatively significant features of this alternative ideal. In this case, the fact that Rousseau's principle reflects the features of his idealistic model does not supply a reason to accept his principle over alternatives.

The *Supportive Claim* implies that Rousseau's model can, however, interpret and operationalize the conceptual content of his principle. To wit, what is meant by “a shared vision of the common good”? Rousseau's model interprets this abstract idea by operationalizing it within a determinate institutional context. Consider a highly intuitive interpretation of this idea, which roots the notion of a shared vision of the common good in individuals' private and partial interests. This interpretation suggests that a shared vision of the common good can emerge only insofar as there exists a way to satisfy individuals' particular interests; this, in turn, suggests that a shared vision of the common good is possible only if individuals' particular interests do not diverge to the point of conflict. Rousseau's model, in contrast, offers a way interpret the idea of a shared vision of the common good that can reconcile this notion with widely divergent individual interests: namely, by showing how a shared vision of the common good can be rooted in individuals' shared commitment to making political decisions from the perspective of an impartial citizen despite their divergent private interests. This thought is still quite abstract. But Rousseau's model helps to make it more concrete by

if it is true. I will take care to observe this complication in later chapters but set it aside for my purposes in this introduction.

presenting a (hypothetical) society that embodies the kind of decision making procedure invoked by the proposed interpretation.

The preceding paragraphs present a very rough and high-level overview of the entire book. In chapter 2, I will motivate and elaborate two ideas that are fundamental for my inquiry, as I indicate in the *Skeptical* and *Supportive Claims*. These are: first, a focus on the potential uses of *idealistic models of society*, which I contrast with *idealistic political principles*, or what political theorists often call “ideal theories”; and second, a distinction between two potential functions of models: that of *supplying reasons for accepting a particular normative claim over alternatives*, and that of *interpreting and operationalizing the conceptual content of a normative claim*. I present my argument for the *Skeptical Claim* across chapters 4–6, where I focus on explaining why the reasoning political theorists use to identify a particular model of society as ideal is liable to support designating a competing model as ideal too. Finally, I present my argument for the *Supportive Claim* across chapters 8 and 9, where I focus on showing that idealistic models of society can, in virtue of being idealistic, sharpen our understanding of the concepts we use to articulate political principles, and that they can do so without also supplying reasons to accept any particular principle.

I have just sketched what, on the surface, looks to be a simple “bad news/good news” story: on one hand, *Skeptical Claim*; on the other, *Supportive Claim*. Yet there’s a deeper narrative thread running through the book. At its core, I develop and examine an account of an intellectual activity that is central to political theory and philosophy: the practice of constructing idealistic models of society and using them to think about politics. I will show how this practice tends to be misguided in important ways. This is for diagnostic purposes. Once we expose the limitations of theorists’ current practice, we will be able to see how we can use idealistic models to generate insights that are fundamental not only for our normative thinking about politics, but also for our efforts to explain real-world political behavior and institutions.

To home in on the practice I have in mind, I present the examples of Plato, Thomas Hobbes, and John Rawls in chapter 3, focusing on identifying their idealistic models (in my intended sense of that notion) and reconstructing the reasoning they use to identify a particular model as “ideal” in some sense—for example, as ideally just. In chapter 4, I build from these examples to develop a general schema of the *comparative mode of reasoning* political theorists use to identify particular models as ideals. According to this comparative approach, a theorist designates a particular model as ideal if they judge that it depicts a “best-case scenario” (in their chosen sense of “best”) in comparison with other models

of society.⁵ Since I intend for this account to capture shared features of the actual practice of political theorists, I have developed it by reflecting on the logical structure of numerous arguments presented by particular theorists. My examples are meant to forge links between the general account and actual practice and to illustrate some central features of the comparative approach. I could have chosen any number of other examples: Aristotle, Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Marx; or Robert Nozick, Ronald Dworkin, G.A. Cohen, and, more recently, Hélène Landemore, and Danielle Allen.⁶ My reflections on the arguments of actual theorists have certainly been informed by a theoretical intuition that some form of comparative reasoning is best suited for designating a particular model as ideal. But this intuition originated, at least in part, in my early efforts to make sense of how particular arguments are supposed to work, and it has been strengthened by subsequent efforts to test it against a wide range of particular arguments. So my account of the comparative approach is the result of an iterative process, going from my reconstructions of particular arguments to a general account and then back again in search of a view that both makes sense of the reasoning theorists actually use to justify their claims that a particular model of society is ideal and also presents an independently plausible account of the kind of reasoning that could justify such claims.

Extant reflections on how idealistic models can contribute to our thinking about politics tend to abstract from the reasoning process theorists use to pick out particular models as ideal.⁷ This abstraction may seem natural: given that we want to say something general about how (if at all) models of ideal societies can inform our thinking, it seems best to set aside the complications that come from thinking about how particular theorists identify particular models as ideal—given their myriad differences, thinking about these details is liable to distract from the general point. For the purposes of the argument, it seems safe to simply assume that we already have an ideal model in hand and go on to consider how it can inform our thinking in virtue of its status as an ideal. Yet

⁵I present a similar “optimization approach” in Wiens 2015*a*, 2017, 2018. There is an important difference between what I am doing in this book and what I was doing in my earlier work. There, I argued that theorists use comparative reasoning to pick out a *set of principles* as ideal. Here, I am arguing, more narrowly, that theorists use comparative reasoning to pick out a candidate *model* as ideal, leaving it open whether theorists use an ideal model to pick out ideal principles.

⁶Nozick (1974); Dworkin (2000); Cohen (2009); Landemore (2020); Allen (2023). I sketch Nozick’s, Cohen’s, and Gerald Gaus’s use of the comparative approach in Wiens 2015*a*, Ingham and Wiens Forthcoming, and Wiens 2018 respectively.

⁷For example: Appiah 2017; Erman and Möller 2022; Ismael 2016; Nefdt 2021; Táiwò 2023. A similar observation applies to extant reflections on ideal theory: they tend to bracket the process by which we settle on an ideal theory with particular content, thinking instead about how an ideal theory can contribute to our normative thinking once we have a determinate ideal theory in hand.

this way of proceeding neglects the possibility that the insights we can draw from idealistic models depends on how one comes to designate a particular model of society as ideal — or whether one can even justifiably designate a particular model as ideal in the first place. We cannot examine this possibility unless we attend to theorists' approach to designating a particular model of society as ideal. And we cannot say something general on this issue unless we develop a general account of theorists' approach to designating a particular model as ideal, one that shows that particular theorists' arguments for designating particular models as ideal share certain structural features, whatever their manifest differences.

Once we have in view a schematic account of theorists' reasoning to an ideal model, we can see that this practice can be decomposed into two broader theoretical practices: that of comparing several models of society with respect to certain normative criteria, and that of analyzing the normatively significant features of a particular model. My argument for the *Skeptical Claim* (chapters 5 and 6) shows how, by combining these broader practices for the purpose of identifying an ideal, political theorists have muddled them in ways that mislead our normative thinking. Yet instead of renouncing these broader practices, we should re-mix them — we should pry them apart and re-direct them to different ends. In so doing, we can expose neglected opportunities for making progress on a task that has largely eluded political theorists: namely, that of thinking systematically about how to trade off disparate normative criteria.

In chapter 7, I will show how we can extend the practice of comparatively evaluating models and re-direct it away from its current purpose — that of designating a particular model as ideal — and toward another — that of sharpening our thinking about the relative significance of disparate normative criteria across a wide range of circumstances. In chapter 8, I will show how we can re-direct the practice of analyzing the normatively significant features of particular idealistic models away from the purpose of justifying our acceptance of particular normative principles and toward that of interpreting and operationalizing the conceptual content of our normative criteria so as to reveal points of congruence and conflict among them, which in turn, sharpens our thinking about normative trade-offs. Instead of putting both practices together to accomplish a single task — identifying an ideal model — we should use them separately to accomplish two complementary tasks — interpreting our normative criteria and estimating their relative significance — the results of which can then be combined to construct a standard for evaluating social and political possibilities that systematizes our thinking about how to trade-off normative criteria across a wide range of circumstances.

So idealistic models can be a valuable tool for normative political theorists, just not for the purpose of supplying reasons to accept particular normative

principles over alternatives. But they are not only valuable for normative inquiry; they are integral to *social scientific inquiry* too. Many of the central questions in social science focus on identifying and explaining the empirical and causal relationships that obtain between abstract normative criteria: Which forms of organizing political power are most effective for fostering mutually beneficial cooperation? Do economic and political regimes that protect individual freedoms of various kinds promote greater general welfare, and if so, how? Is social equality necessary to sustain democracy, and if so, which forms and why? We cannot sensibly investigate these questions without specifying the conceptual content of key terms: “political power,” “mutually beneficial cooperation,” “individual freedom,” “social equality,” “democracy,” and so on. I will show that idealistic models can — and should — play a role in this task.

The basic idea — which I present in more detail in chapter 10 — is this: if political scientists wish to contribute to broader conversations about matters of normative concern, then they must define their terms in ways that allow them to connect their research with these conversations.⁸ My thought here goes beyond the familiar thought that political scientists should pay attention to the meaning of the normative ideals they invoke in their work.⁹ An example will help to illustrate. Imagine we are participating in a conversation about our reasons to value democracy, in which we are tallying the various potential advantages and disadvantages of living in a democratic society. Suppose, for illustrative purposes, that we are using the term “democracy” to pick out the classical notion of *collective self-government*.¹⁰ Our conversation thus aims at a shared understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of living in a society in which citizens as a collective have the kind of influence over political decisions required for the classical notion to apply. Suppose now that a political scientist enters the conversation and challenges one of the propositions we have accepted — say, that democratic governance hinders economic growth — by appealing to empirical studies that seem inconsistent with that proposition. If, for the purposes of these studies, “democracy” is defined as a regime in which political leaders are selected by competitive elections, then it is not immediately clear that we should concede the challenge. Whether we should depends on whether the two notions — *democracy as competitive elections* and *democracy as collective self-government* — correspond to the same topic of conversation. This will fail to be

⁸My discussion of this point, now and later, draws on work done together with Sean Ingham.

⁹For example: “What do those ‘ideals’ that we speak so confidently about — for example, democracy, equality, non-discrimination, efficiency — mean? And how important are they (relative to each other and to other normative goals)?” (Gerring and Yesnowitz, 2006, 108).

¹⁰See, among others, Dunn 2004; Lane 2016; Ober 2017; Tuck 2016.

so if—as seems plausible¹¹—the set of regimes in which citizens select their political leaders through competitive elections diverges significantly from the set of regimes in which citizens exercise the kind of influence over political decisions that constitutes *collective self-government*. In such a case, the political scientists' empirical studies may contribute to a particular scholarly conversation about the value of *democracy as competitive elections*, but they will fail to contribute to our conversation about the value of *democracy as collective self-government*.

We can now glimpse how idealistic models can play a role in social scientific inquiry. Suppose, for the purposes of our conversations about our reasons to value democracy (or equality, or freedom), we—the members of some academic or political community—define “democracy” by appeal to an idealistic model of democracy; that is, we agree that a particular idealistic model of democracy is a paradigm case of the topic we are discussing. (It would be natural for us to do this if a particular model embodies aspirations we associate with the term “democracy.”) Then the topic of our conversation is (partly) constituted by this idealistic model. If social scientists want to contribute to our conversation, then they must show why their scientific studies of democracy are relevant to the topic of conversation as constituted by this model. Thus, so long as social scientists aim to contribute to our conversations, they must define their terms with reference to the relevant idealistic models.

Existing arguments supporting idealistic political thought obscure the preceding thought. By insisting that the primary purpose of idealistic thought is normative, supporters encourage us to think about the relationship between normative theory and social scientific inquiry in terms of a fairly stark division of labor: normative theorists identify the principles we should use to guide our thinking about which objectives we should pursue, while social scientists assess the feasibility of various possibilities and identify institutional mechanisms and social practices that can help us effectively implement our chosen goals.¹² Some may think this division of labor can deflect skeptical objections to idealistic political theory: “Our job as political theorists is to set long-term normative goals, which should not be constrained by current social and political realities. And we need not concern ourselves with feasibility or implementation issues because that’s the business of social science.” Ironically, however, this division of labor only bolsters skepticism: if the purpose of normative theory is to identify objectives that are plausibly practicable, and if idealistic normative theory is thought to fail in this regard because it strays too far from reality, then it seems we

¹¹ See, e.g., Levitsky and Way 2010, p. 1.

¹² See Swift and White’s (2008) statement of this “division of labor” model. Gerring and Yesnowitz (2006); Shapiro (2002); Warren (1989) (among others) observe the practice of dividing labor in this way to criticize it.

must reject idealistic thought as useless.¹³ Impatience ensues: insofar as political theorists persist in putting forward idealistic models, they fail to uphold their responsibility in the disciplinary division of labor.

By developing a general account of political theorists' practice of thinking with idealistic models and examining its strengths and limitations, I uncover reasons to think differently about the relationship between theorists' idealistic models and political inquiry more generally. First, by showing that idealistic models do not function to justify our acceptance of normative principles to guide practical political action, my argument for the *Skeptical Claim* challenges the thought that idealistic political theory can perform its assigned task within the simple division of labor model. Second, by showing how idealistic models can help to interpret and operationalize the conceptual content of abstract normative criteria, my argument for the *Supportive Claim* indicates how idealistic models can contribute to the explanatory aims of political science.

1.2 What (not) to expect

There are two types of book about method. One is like assembly instructions for do-it-yourself furniture: it specifies a task, outlines the steps required to complete the task, and prescribes tools to be used at each step. The other is like an owner's manual for a tool: it specifies the features of the tool, describes its basic functions with reference to core tasks, and registers important warnings against misuse. This book is an instance of the second type: it specifies the features of idealistic models and the process by which theorists designate them as ideal; it describes their conceptual function with respect to various normative and social scientific tasks; and it warns against their misuse in pursuit of certain normative purposes. Viewing the book in this way explains the choices I have made regarding what to talk about and what to set aside.

I expect many readers will most readily associate this book with debates about so-called "ideal theory" since most contemporary discussions of idealistic political thought have been conducted in that idiom.¹⁴ So I expect that, for many readers, it will help to locate my arguments relative to these debates; I do so where appropriate — in particular, in chapters 2, 6, and 8. Yet readers should beware: *this is not exactly a book about ideal theory*. Thinking clearly about theorists' practice of thinking with idealistic models requires us to disentangle that practice from the various things that have been discussed under the rubric of "ideal

¹³Compare Valentini's (2009, 333) statement of "the paradox of ideal theory."

¹⁴For surveys of the relevant literature, see Hamlin and Stemplowska 2012; Stemplowska and Swift 2012; Thompson 2020; Valentini 2012.

theory.” It is often unclear what theorists are referring to with the term “ideal theory”: sometimes they are referring to *sets of normative principles*; sometimes to a *general approach* to thinking about normative principles, which involves the use of “idealizations” of some kind; sometimes to *theoretical models* of some kind or other; sometimes all of these things are run together. Except when discussing others’ views, I will avoid talk of “ideal theory” to avoid misinterpretations of the subject and scope of my inquiry. (I say more about this in chapter 2.)

More specifically, I do not want to talk about the value or purpose of normative principles — idealistic or otherwise. Merely observing that a principle is *idealistic* in its content raises no distinctive barrier to our accepting it as normatively authoritative. Take the political principle I have attributed to Rousseau, for example, and suppose not only that its content characterizes features of a society we think of as idealistic, but also that, as a matter of discovery, we specify the content of this principle by analyzing the normatively significant features of an idealistic model. Now suppose we hold fixed the content of the principle while setting aside its association with an idealistic model. The questions we face when considering why we might accept this principle as a guide for real-world political action are the same questions we face when considering why we might accept any principle, including less idealistic ones: Would implementing this principle mitigate significant injustices? Would it bring about desirable outcomes? And so on. Having abstracted from its association with an idealistic society, we might uncover reasons to accept Rousseau’s principle that make no reference to that association — for example, that trying to realize it would in fact mitigate present injustices and improve upon the status quo. The distinctive question raised by a principle’s *idealistic* status is whether we should accept it *in virtue of the fact that* or *because* it characterizes the normatively significant features of an idealistic society. Recognizing this prompts us to turn our attention from thinking about the value or purpose of idealistic *principles* to that of idealistic *models*— in particular, whether the fact that a principle characterizes the normatively significant features of an idealistic model can be a reason to accept that principle. This is the question I want us to focus on. I eschew talk of “ideal theory” to avoid obscuring this question.

Among debates about ideal theory, my inquiry appears most directly related to that concerning the appropriate uses of “idealizations” in normative theory.¹⁵ But I largely sidestep this debate, for two reasons. First, my skeptical argument does not depend on asserting any restrictions on idealizations. My reason for arguing that idealistic models do not supply reasons to accept any particular

¹⁵See, for example, Carroll 2020; Hancox-Li 2017; Jacopo Uberti 2014; Monaghan 2022; Mills 2005; O’Neill 1996; Valentini 2009.

principle is not that they incorporate “inappropriate” or “bad” idealizations, but that we cannot identify any particular one of them as warranting special attention. Second, whether any particular idealization is useful for normative theory depends on what we take to be the purpose of normative theorizing. To wit, assuming a model society in which people generally comply with a normative principle may distort our thinking about which institutional reforms can most effectively mitigate present injustices,¹⁶ yet it may be perfectly appropriate for thinking about which institutional schemes qualify as perfectly just.¹⁷ But I set aside questions about the purposes of normative theorizing. I have very little to say about how we “should” do political theory in general — whether political theory should be “realistic” or “moralistic”; whether it should be “ideal” or “non-ideal”; whether it should be “practice-dependent” or “practice-independent”; whether and how elements from competing positions should be combined; and so on.¹⁸ For that matter, I have very little to say about how theorists should go about any particular task, such as justifying our acceptance of normative principles. This being an owner’s manual for idealistic models, I aim to say something about what we can and can’t do with idealistic models whatever purpose one thinks political theorists should pursue or however one thinks we should pursue it. Consequently, I leave it to others to figure out which particular idealizations are appropriate for different purposes.¹⁹

Since I am at pains to distance my inquiry from debates about ideal theory, some might wonder why I don’t instead frame it by reference to a different debate. Given my insistence that we focus on the uses of idealistic models, debates about the function of models in the natural and social sciences might naturally come to mind. Models of various kinds are ubiquitous in our thinking about politics,²⁰ but I do not intend to examine, in general, the uses of all kinds of models in political inquiry. I want to examine how political theorists use a specific kind of model, which is exemplified by Rousseau’s model of a “society of the general will,” among others. Since the practice of thinking with this specific kind of model does not receive much attention in more general debates about the use of models, framing my inquiry with reference to these debates is liable to provoke distracting questions. For one thing, these debates tend to focus on how models represent aspects of the actual world and, in virtue of this representation relation, what they

¹⁶See, for example, Anderson 2010; Mills 2005; Schwartzman 2006.

¹⁷See, for example, Carroll 2020; Estlund 2020; May 2021.

¹⁸For surveys of the relevant issues, see Erman and Möller 2015; Rossi and Sleat 2014; Stemplowska and Swift 2012; Valentini 2012.

¹⁹But see McPherson and Plunkett Forthcoming*a*.

²⁰Johnson 2014; Wolin 2004, chap. 1.

tell us about how the actual world works.²¹ Starting from within these debates is thus liable to prime readers to think about these issues. But this focus obscures a crucial feature of political theorists' idealistic models: that, often, their primary function is not to represent features of the actual world nor to help us understand how it works, but instead to reveal something about our aspirations for the actual world. We might try to draw such models into existing debates by saying that they are meant to represent societies that we aspire to realize but I doubt this is a helpful way to proceed. To wit, utopian models might reveal something about our aspirations without necessarily representing a society that we can legitimately aspire to realize (for example, because it is a mere fantasy). More generally, although I will sometimes say that idealistic models represent certain social and political possibilities, this is just a convenient turn of phrase; so far as I can tell, nothing I say here about the functions of idealistic models turns on how we think about this representation relation (for example, whether such models resemble or are isomorphic to the relevant possibilities). I do not spend much time trying to situate my inquiry within existing debates about the uses of models because I do not aim to stake a position in these debates. (I will nonetheless draw from debates about the cognitive functions of models at various places in the book, chapter 8 in particular.)

Another potential distraction arises from the fact that many discussions of models in political inquiry focus on the place of *formal* models in our normative and explanatory thinking — game-theoretic and social choice-theoretic models in particular.²² But the modeling practice I focus on here is largely informal, and I do not intend to say much about the value and purpose of specifically formal models. (I do, however, make some remarks on this issue to motivate my use of a formal model for my argument in chapter 5.) Given their apparent divergence, many readers will be reluctant to accept — certainly without a detailed explanation — that theorists' idealistic models or their methodological practices bear any meaningful resemblance to those of formal theorists. I think there would be something to gain from showing the convergence of these modeling practices, but doing so would require a more detailed examination than I can pursue here without distracting from the main points I wish to make.²³ At most, then, linking political theorists' practice of thinking with idealistic scenarios to modeling prac-

²¹See Elliott-Graves and Weisberg 2014; Frigg and Hartmann 2020 for general surveys of these debates.

²²On models in political theory, Chung and Kogelmann N.d.; Hankins and Vanderschraaf 2021; Hirose 2008; on models in social science, see Ashworth, Berry and Bueno de Mesquita 2021; Clarke and Primo 2012; Johnson 2021; Mershon and Shvetsova 2019; Morgan 2012; Page 2018; Rubinstein 2012.

²³For some of my preliminary thoughts on this topic, see Ingham and Wiens Forthcoming.

tices in the natural and social sciences is an exit rather than an entry point for my inquiry.²⁴

I close this introduction with a couple of miscellaneous scope-setting remarks. First, because I discuss (in chapters 7 and 8) how certain practices in political theory can be useful for thinking about normative trade-offs and, in turn, constructing a standard for comparatively evaluating social possibilities, you might expect me to present a comprehensive account of how to carry out this task. But I will do no such thing because this book is about how certain tools can contribute to this task and not a complete accounting of what this task involves.

Second, because I argue (in chapters 8–10) that idealistic models can be useful for interpreting and operationalizing certain concepts that figure prominently in normative and social scientific inquiry, you might expect me to develop a more or less comprehensive account of what is involved in ascribing conceptual content to normative and social scientific terms. There is a large and growing philosophical literature on “conceptual engineering,” in addition to a vast psychology literature on concept acquisition and the role of concepts in human reasoning.²⁵ Since this is not a book about how to carry out the task of ascribing conceptual content to normative and social scientific terms, I avoid these literatures except as they might intersect with questions about the uses and misuses of idealistic models.

²⁴For related reasons, I do not discuss the use of idealistic models in disciplines beyond political theory—for example, those in theoretical welfare economics (although John Harsanyi makes a cameo appearance in chapter 4). For introductions to economic models that may provoke some ideas about what my arguments imply for economic modeling practices or vice versa, see (among others) Hausman 1992; Morgan 2012.

²⁵For an introduction to the relevant literature in philosophy, see Burgess, Cappelen and Plunkett 2020. For an introduction to the relevant literature in psychology, see Murphy 2002.

CHAPTER 2

Idealistic Political Theory Forms and Functions

People have argued about the value of idealistic political thought for a long time. Soon after Plato constructed an ideally just city in *Republic*, his student, Aristotle, objected that “as a means to the end which he ascribes to the state, the scheme, taken literally, is impracticable.”¹ No sooner had Machiavelli railed against “imaginary republics and principalities that have never existed in practice and never could” than More published his *Utopia*.² Rousseau’s republic of virtuous citizens presents a contrast with Madison’s efforts to “cur[e] the mischiefs of faction” by designing republican institutions to “control[] its *effects*” while assuming its “*causes* . . . cannot be removed.”³ Visions of socialist utopias proliferated through the nineteenth century, only for Marx and Engels to dismiss them as “fantastic pictures of future society” that are “necessarily doomed to failure” because of their progenitors’ failure to take a clear-eyed view of real-world social and economic circumstances.⁴

I want to pursue these recurring themes by examining political theorists’ use of idealistic scenarios to think about political behavior and institutions. Most contemporary discussions of my topic have been subsumed under several de-

¹ Plato, *Republic*; Aristotle, *Politics*, ii.2, 1261a12.

² Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chap. 15; More, *Utopia*.

³ Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*; Madison, Federalist no. 10, original emphasis.

⁴ Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, p. 498; the utopian socialists singled out for criticism are Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, and Robert Owen.

bates that are part of a broader “methodological turn” in political theory.⁵ The impetus for these debates is John Rawls’s distinction between “ideal theory,” which “works out the principles that characterize a well-ordered [i.e., “perfectly just”] society under favorable circumstances,” and “nonideal theory,” which “ask[s] which principles to adopt under less happy circumstances.”⁶ Rawls gives ideal theory a certain kind of priority: normative political theorists should “begin[] with ideal theory” and work on nonideal theory “after an ideal conception of justice has been chosen” because the former “provides. . . the only basis for the systematic grasp of the[] more pressing problems” that are the province of the latter.⁷ Rawls’s way of thinking about these issues set the agenda for normative political theory in the decades following the publication of *A Theory of Justice*. But his views about method have become a source of considerable controversy in the past twenty years, with several debates considering the merits of ideal theory from various angles.

As I indicated in the last chapter, thinking clearly about theorists’ use of idealistic models requires us to disentangle that practice from various other things that have been discussed under the rubric of “ideal theory.” To avoid misunderstandings, then, I will largely avoid “ideal theory” talk except where doing so helps to clarify the points I want to establish. Finding the terms of existing debates inadequate for my purposes, I use this chapter to stipulate to my question and the concepts that frame my examination of it. (For those who think I have discarded “ideal theory” too quickly, I discuss the defects of existing debates for my purposes in a short appendix at the end of this chapter.) In particular, I introduce two distinctions that will provide central organizing devices for the remainder of the book. First, I distinguish idealistic models from idealistic principles and set my focus on the former. Second, I distinguish between two general types of function a model might perform: a normative function and a conceptual function. With these distinctions in place, I organize my inquiry around two questions: Can idealistic models perform a normative function? Can idealistic models perform a conceptual function? Starting in chapter 3 and culminating in chapter 6, I will argue for the *Skeptical Claim* presented in the previous chapter, which is my answer to the first question. In chapters 8 and 9, I will argue for the *Supportive Claim*, which is my answer to the second question. I conclude this chapter with a definitive statement of the subject and scope of the chapters to come.

⁵“Methodological turn”: Erman and Möller 2015; Valentini 2012.

⁶Rawls 1999b, 216.

⁷Rawls 1999b, 8, 216.

2.1 Forms of idealistic thought: models, not principles

I want to focus on what we should make of the kind of idealistic models of society that pervade political thought — models of the kind presented by Rousseau in *On the Social Contract*. More specifically, I want to ask: How, if at all, can these kinds of idealistic models contribute to our thinking about real-world political behavior and institutions? To articulate my question more precisely and thereby define the scope of my inquiry, let me introduce some basic terminology and concepts.

Put loosely, a model scenario is, for my purposes, a simplified description of a social and political possibility — a way the social and political world might be. We don't need to be precise about what "possible" means here, except to say that it should not limit our attention to ways the social and political world *could be* given the way it is now or given the way it has been historically. My notion of a model scenario is meant to allow for models of fanciful utopian scenarios.⁸

While this notion of a model scenario points us in the right direction, we will need to be more precise to focus our attention. Hence, I will say that a *model scenario* is a simplified description of arrangements for organizing social and political life (formal institutions, informal practices, and the like), which renders transparent the connection between these arrangements and their associated patterns of interpersonal behavior — patterns that sustain the specified arrangements and/or patterns that are engendered by them. To illustrate this notion, take the following simple example.

Direct Democracy with Mandatory Voting. A society is deciding whether to implement a wealth tax, a 0.5% annual tax on the net value of individuals' assets above \$1 million. The decision is made by majority rule in a popular referendum, in which all adult citizens are required to vote (under threat of a \$500 fine). Sixty percent of eligible voters favor the tax, while forty percent oppose it. After the referendum, in which 98% of eligible voters cast unspoiled ballots, the government implements the wealth tax.

For my purposes, we can decompose political theorists' model scenarios into

⁸There are extensive debates about what kinds of things models are and what kinds of cognitive functions they perform; see Frigg and Hartmann 2020 for a survey. To keep things determinate in my own mind, I tend to think and talk about theorists' model scenarios as a kind of thought experiment involving credible hypothetical worlds (see Mäki, 2005, 2009; Sugden, 2000). But I don't mean to take a strong stand on the kind of thing these models are and, as far as I can tell, everything I say here is compatible with thinking of theorists' models as different kinds of things — whether as fictional objects, abstract set-theoretic structures, or sets of procedures for running a simulation (see Godfrey-Smith, 2009; Weisberg, 2013). I will engage with existing debates about the cognitive functions of models at various places in the book, chapter 8 in particular.

two basic components, a structure and a context.⁹ A model's *structure* consists of the institutional schemes and social norms and practices that shape patterns of interpersonal behavior and by which certain outcomes are realized. It is that which determines the actions available to individuals and the manner in which different combinations of actions produce outcomes. The decision procedure and the fine for non-voting are the structural components of *Direct Democracy with Mandatory Voting*. In all the examples we will focus on, the structural components of the model are institutional arrangements, so I will typically refer to them as *institutional arrangements* or just *arrangements* for short.

A model's *context* consists of a range of factors that are extraneous to the arrangements but can nonetheless influence their operation and the outcomes they produce. The contextual factors in *Direct Democracy with Mandatory Voting* include the details of the wealth tax proposal, the voters' preferences over policies, and citizens' willingness to cast a ballot given the fine. The outcome in the example depends on our specification of these parameters. For instance, the tax would not have been adopted if we had instead assumed that 60% of the voters opposed it. More generally, contextual factors include the quantity and quality of available natural or technological resources, or the distribution of cognitive abilities, preferences, or motivational drives within a population.

A model's arrangements are the basis for its *theoretically significant features*. A model feature is *theoretically significant* if it is centrally relevant to a theorist's purpose in considering that possibility. Depending on a theorist's purpose in considering *Direct Democracy with Mandatory Voting*, its theoretically significant features may be the extent to which people are treated as political equals, the extent to which people are free to choose their level of political participation, or the society's propensity to choose just policies. A model's arrangements can be constitutively and/or contingently related to its theoretically significant features. An arrangement is *constitutively related* to a theoretically significant feature when the structure of the arrangement is a theoretically significant feature in its own right; for instance, an equal allocation of voting rights is a constitutive component of the arrangement in our example. An arrangement is *contingently related* to a theoretically significant feature when it constitutes a mechanism for bringing about such features; for instance, majority voting plus universal suffrage affects a society's propensity to choose just policies, but this effect is contingent on voters' preferences over policies. More generally, contingently related features typically supervene upon the patterns of interpersonal behavior induced by the specified arrangements. Contextual factors serve to explain why an arrangement induces a

⁹I settled on this way of putting things in collaboration with Sean Ingham (Ingham and Wiens, Forthcoming).

particular behavioral pattern, which in turn realizes the theoretically significant features to which it is contingently related.

A model scenario can represent several distinct possibilities — namely, any possibilities that bear the combination of features, arrangements, and contextual factors depicted by the model scenario while varying along dimensions that are set aside by the model. In other words, models are more abstract than possibilities: possibilities are maximally rich in detail, whereas models bracket many of the details of the possibilities they represent to focus on a specific set of details for theoretical examination.

I want to examine how political theorists' *idealistic* model scenarios contribute to our thinking about politics. For my purposes, a model scenario is *idealistic* if it satisfies two conditions: (1) descriptively speaking, it differs from real-world observations (whether with respect to arrangements or contextual factors) in such a way that some people are inclined to doubt whether it could be realized in the real world; and (2) normatively speaking, it is upheld as a substantial improvement upon the real-world status quo. These conditions are admittedly vague but they will do. I can't think of a principled way to make them more precise and, in any case, I want to avoid debates about which kinds of "idealizations" are "appropriate," "good," "useful," and so on.¹⁰ Although vague, I give this definition because it directs our attention to clear-cut examples of the kinds of model scenarios I am examining — Rousseau's "society of the general will," Plato's just city in *Republic*, and so on. Disagreement about borderline cases won't matter since my argument will not depend on exactly where one draws the relevant lines.

Existing discussions of ideal theory frequently intermingle models and principles (see the appendix below) but, for my purposes, we need to keep them separate. I will say that a *normative principle* is a statement that specifies certain conditions the satisfaction of which makes an item within its domain of application (for example, an action or an institution) good or bad, just or unjust, right or wrong, obligatory or impermissible, and so on. Take, for example, the principle I attributed to Rousseau in chapter 1: *A political society should be based on laws that each citizen can see as reflecting a shared vision of the common good*. This expresses a proposition that (1) specifies a condition that a particular society may or may not satisfy, and (2) assigns a normative status to a society (for example, legitimate or illegitimate, just or unjust) depending on whether or not it satisfies this condition. To be a principle, the statement must potentially apply to more than one individual; hence, it must be formulated in general terms rather than

¹⁰See, for example, Carroll 2020; Hancox-Li 2017; Jacopo Uberti 2014; Monaghan 2022; Mills 2005; O'Neill 1996; Valentini 2009.

referring to particular individuals by name.¹¹

As I see things, the key difference between models and principles is that the latter are open-ended in a way that the former are not: whereas a principle states a condition without regard for whether any item in the specified domain satisfies it, a model specifies both whether or not a given condition is satisfied and, if satisfied, the mechanism or process by which it is satisfied. As a result, a model is more definite than a principle; or, put the other way around, a principle is more abstract than a model. Return to Rousseau. He presents us with a principle of political legitimacy and a model of a society that instantiates this principle — a specification of institutional arrangements for making legislative decisions together with assumptions about citizens' motivational and cognitive capacities. Let's note two differences between Rousseau's principle and his model. First, his principle characterizes the normatively significant features of a model scenario to which a certain normative status is assigned (for example, legitimate, just, good), whereas his model is characterized not only by its normatively significant features, but also by the arrangements by which those features are realized and the context in which they are realized. Second, and relatedly, Rousseau's principle can be instantiated by numerous model scenarios — namely, any model scenario that bears the features it specifies — whereas his model is a singular combination of significant features, arrangements, and context. These observations apply to principles and models more generally. To be sure, a model can represent more than one social possibility because, as noted above, models are more abstract than possibilities. My point here is that they are less abstract than principles.

I will often say of principles, as I just did, that they characterize the normatively significant features of model scenarios — for example, that principles of justice characterize the features of just scenarios. This is compatible with two different relations between models and principles. On the one hand, a principle could characterize the features of a model because the former *identifies* the latter. According to this picture, the direction of explanation is from principle to model: we start with (for example) principles of justice and use these to pick out certain model scenarios as just. On the other hand, a principle could characterize the features of a model because the former *reflects* the latter. According to this picture, the direction of explanation is from model to principle: we start with (for example) a model of a just society and use it as a basis for specifying the content of our principles of justice.¹² I leave it open which of these two relations obtains when I say that a principle characterizes the features of a model scenario.

¹¹List and Valentini 2016, 535.

¹²Some might find it useful to understand my point here by saying that the identification relation implies a *model-to-theory direction of fit*, while the reflection relation implies a *theory-to-model direction of fit*.

Nonetheless, the two relations bear differing significance for my inquiry. I am happy to concede that principles are the sort of thing we can use to identify scenarios that have a certain normative status. I am simply not asking about what we can do with principles of various kinds — for example, whether we can use idealistic principles of justice to identify model scenarios that we should take as an aim for real-world political reforms or as a benchmark for evaluating feasible reform options. As far as I am concerned, it is obvious that principles can perform that function — assuming we have good reasons to accept them for that purpose. Of course, flagging this assumption raises a question of which particular principles we have reasons to accept for these practical purposes. This is where my inquiry comes in. I want to examine whether models of a certain kind — idealistic model scenarios — can provide a basis for justifying our acceptance of particular principles for certain purposes. More concretely, I want to ask whether the fact that a principle *reflects* certain features of an idealistic model scenario gives us a reason to accept that principle for some normative purpose. So, while I happily grant that principles can *identify* models scenarios for certain normative purposes, I call into question whether principles are useful for any purpose because they *reflect* the features of an idealistic model.

2.2 Functions of idealistic models: normative and conceptual

We will examine how political theorists' idealistic models contribute to our thinking about politics. I frame this as a question about the theoretical functions of idealistic models and set aside questions about the functions of principles, idealistic or otherwise.

I distinguish between two broad categories of uses for (idealistic) models. A model *performs a normative function* (also: serves a normative purpose) if and only if, and to the extent that, our analysis of its theoretically significant features supplies reasons to accept a particular normative principle over competing principles.¹³ This operationalizes the idea that we have reasons to adopt a principle as a guide for our thought and action because it reflects the normatively significant features of an idealistic model scenario. A model *performs a conceptual function* (also: serves a conceptual purpose) if and only if, and to the extent that, our analysis of its features helps to clarify, interpret, and operationalize the

¹³The principle in question might simply refer to the model; for example, *We should aim to realize a society that resembles this model*, or *One society is better than another if the former more closely resembles this model than does the latter*.

conceptual content of terms we use to talk about politics, including terms we use to articulate normative principles.

This way of articulating the potential functions of idealistic models presupposes a more general picture of normative thinking, on which theorists justify their acceptance of particular principles while acknowledging the possibility of accepting alternative *candidate principles*, which diverge in their practical implications from the principles they in fact accept.¹⁴ In virtue of being *normative* principles, these candidates are supposed to give us — if accepted — weighty (if not conclusive) reasons to perform certain actions and avoid performing others, or to accept certain judgments and reject others. Theorists' task is thus to explain why we should accept some particular candidate principles as authoritative for the purpose of organizing and guiding our thinking about what we should do or what we should think. Given the nature of this task, our justification for accepting particular principles as authoritative cannot be arbitrary: any argument for accepting particular principles must be supported by reasons, which weigh in favor of accepting the proposed principles rather than competing candidates.

One may think that idealistic models are useful because they supply reasons for accepting a particular set of candidate principles. The basic idea is straightforward: if we can show that certain candidate principles reflect the normatively significant features of a model scenario that we deem “normatively ideal” in some sense, then that fact — the correspondence between the features specified by the principle and the features of the ideal model — gives us a strong reason to accept those principles as authoritative for some normative purpose — whether it be for specifying goals for practical action, or for comparatively evaluating reform options, or for distinguishing just arrangements from unjust arrangements. If we can sustain this thought, then idealistic models perform a normative function in my sense.

Let's notice that a particular idealistic model can supply reasons to accept particular principles only if we have reasons to think *that model* stands out from among the many model scenarios we could bring into focus. To make this concrete, suppose we bring into view a particular idealistic model: for instance, a model of a society in which citizens equally enjoy a broad package of civil and political rights, they have effectively equal opportunities to access important positions within society, and institutions are organized to maximize the prospects of the least advantaged citizens. We then argue that this model gives us reasons to accept principles that reflect its normatively significant features — Rawls's

¹⁴Thanks to Lisa Ellis for prompting me to put this point in a way that is consistent with, yet avoids presupposing, the thought that we choose which principles to accept.

principles of justice, for instance.¹⁵ This argument is bound to be unsatisfying unless we can say why we should focus on *this* model rather than, say, a model of a society in which institutions are organized to maximize citizens' average welfare. For had we brought the latter model into view, then by an analogous argument, we would have had reasons to accept the principle of average utility. A model of a Rawlsian society cannot supply reasons to accept Rawls's principles simply because we have that model in view; given the range of competing models we can bring into view, it can do so only if we have reasons to think that such a model merits special attention in our normative thinking. I will mark this point by saying that a particular idealistic model can perform a normative function only if we have reasons to designate it as an *ideal* scenario.

I want to emphasize that, at this point in my discussion, "ideal" simply means "merits special attention in our normative thinking." As I define it, "ideal" does not bear any of the myriad connotations it has acquired in debates about ideal theory.¹⁶ Hence, an ideal scenario is not, by definition, a full-compliance scenario,¹⁷ nor a scenario that assumes certain idealizations,¹⁸ nor a utopian scenario,¹⁹ nor a society that we should aim to realize.²⁰ In practice, "ideal scenario" may acquire any of these connotations; for example, if a theorist thinks that only full-compliance scenarios merit special attention. In the chapters to come, I will argue that political theorists typically use a form of comparative reasoning to pick out particular models for special attention. Given this practice, we can think of "ideal scenario" as synonymous with "best-case scenario," with the latter notion being capacious enough to include yet more specific connotations.²¹ What is important here is that, for my purposes, any more specific connotations we associate with the phrase "ideal scenario" are so associated not by definition but as a result of reflecting on the practices by which theorists pick out particular model scenarios for special attention.

Idealistic models can help theorists reflect on their reasons for accepting particular principles without supplying reasons for accepting any particular candidates. Before we can justify our acceptance of certain principles, we must

¹⁵For a statement of Rawls's principles, see Rawls 2001, 42.

¹⁶For surveys of these connotations, see Hamlin and Stemplowska 2012; Stemplowska and Swift 2012; Thompson 2020; Valentini 2012.

¹⁷For example, May 2021; Rawls 1999*b*.

¹⁸For example, Jacopo Uberti 2014; Mills 2005; O'Neill 1996; Valentini 2009.

¹⁹For example, Bertea Forthcoming; Enoch 2018; Estlund 2020; Prendergast Forthcoming.

²⁰For example, Sen 2009; Simmons 2010.

²¹What I have in mind is similar in spirit to Aristotle's discussion in book IV of *Politics*, where the phrase "best constitution" is used to pick out several distinct concepts, all of which are appropriate objects of study for political theorists.

understand their conceptual content—in particular, the meaning of key normative terms and the manner in which the concepts they pick out relate to each other. When justifying their acceptance of certain principles against alternatives, theorists typically appeal to the relative desirability of their favored principles' practical implications when applied to a wide range of particular situations. One often takes as a reason to accept a certain principle the fact that it has a desirable implication—for example, that it implies a cooperative form of behavior or a social practice that treats people with dignity. Likewise, one often takes as a reason against accepting a principle the fact that it has an unacceptable implication—for example, that it implies sacrificing the basic needs of many people to satisfy the frivolous desires of a few. Absent an adequate understanding of candidate principles' conceptual content, we cannot credibly specify and assess their practical implications across a suitable range of situations; in turn, we cannot figure out which considerations support our acceptance of which principles. Idealistic models may aid our efforts to justify our acceptance of particular candidate principles by providing a determinate embodiment of certain principles, thereby clarifying and giving definition to their respective conceptual contents. By performing this function, idealistic models do not *supply reasons* for accepting any particular principle—specifying principles' conceptual content leaves open the question of which principle we should accept. Yet, by clarifying a principle's conceptual content, idealistic models can help us assess which considerations count as reasons in favor of which principles by enabling us to credibly specify a principle's practical implications across some range of situations. If idealistic models help in this way, then they perform a conceptual function in my sense.

To illustrate the distinction between the two functions of idealistic models, let's briefly return to the example of Rousseau's ideal society from chapter 1. To be clear, I take Rousseau's model to consist of a set of arrangements, which govern legislative decision making and executive implementation, and a specification of the context in which those arrangements are implemented, which pertain to (among other things) citizens' motivations when participating in legislative assemblies and the viability of regular assemblies of the entire citizen body. Let's continue with our assumption that Rousseau's model is characterized by the following principle: *A political society should be based on laws that each citizen can see as reflecting a shared vision of the common good.* We might wonder whether we should accept this principle as authoritative for some normative purpose, perhaps as specifying the kind of society we should aim to bring about through practical action or as a benchmark for evaluating more realistic possibilities. My question is, what function does Rousseau's model perform in our efforts to give reasons for accepting this principle? If the fact that the principle reflects Rousseau's model gives us a reason to accept this principle, then his model

performs a normative function. In other words, Rousseau's model performs a normative function if the explanation for why we should accept the principle is something along the following lines: "We should accept this principle [for some normative purpose] because, in the ideal society depicted by Rousseau's model, people live according to laws that each can see as reflecting a shared vision of the common good."

Besides supplying a reason to accept the principle, Rousseau's model performs a conceptual function if it sheds light on the principle's conceptual content. We can readily see the need for such illumination: just what it means for a citizen to live under laws they can see as reflecting a shared vision of the common good is not at all transparent because that idea is so abstract. We might use Rousseau's model to help us think systematically about which conditions are necessary and/or sufficient for this abstract idea to be realized. For example, Rousseau's model presents a (hypothetical) society that concretely embodies decision making procedures that are alleged to deliver laws that everyone can see as reflecting a shared vision of the common good, on the assumption that citizens share a commitment to making political decisions from the perspective of an impartial citizen. This in turn allows us to see how the notion of a shared vision of the common good can be rendered consistent with the assumption that individuals' private interests diverge, perhaps quite widely. The result is a clearer understanding of the conditions that are necessary and/or sufficient to satisfy the proposed principle and, thus, a clearer understanding of the considerations that count in favor of accepting it as normatively authoritative.

Let's notice that an idealistic model can perform a conceptual function without being designated ideal. To perform a conceptual function, a model must embody a certain concept (or set of concepts) in a determinate and transparent way. But in doing this, we are not required to also say that the model stands apart from among a set of candidate scenarios as a normative ideal. We can, for example, agree that Rousseau's model is useful for embodying the conceptual content of a particular principle without agreeing that the society it depicts is in any way desirable; indeed, we may think such a society is highly undesirable given certain criteria for normatively assessing model scenarios.

As I define them, normative and conceptual functions are not mutually exclusive: a theorist can use the same model to perform both functions simultaneously. Also, this distinction is not meant to be exhaustive: a theorist may use an idealistic model to perform functions besides these two. For example, a theorist may use an idealistic model not (or not only) for normative or conceptual purposes, but for the rhetorical purpose of making vivid to us reasons for accepting a principle that we already accept on independent grounds, or for the motivational purposes of inspiring people to behave in ways that are morally better than they might have

otherwise or of bolstering their commitment to pursuing a demanding normative goal.²² I am happy to concede that idealistic models can perform functions besides the two I have defined and then set those aside. I focus on two questions: Can idealistic models perform a normative function? and, Can they perform a conceptual function? As I have already indicated, my answer to the first question is “No,” and my answer to the second is “Yes.”

Some might worry that we cannot use mutually inclusive categories to neatly classify particular cases of political theorists thinking with idealistic models. I think this is a feature rather than a bug. In practice, political theorists are often unclear about the function an idealistic model is performing in their thinking. Unsurprisingly, then, many instances of a political theorist thinking with an idealistic model can be plausibly interpreted as performing, say, a normative function, or a conceptual function, or as performing both functions simultaneously. My classification scheme has the advantage of fitting with a practice that is often ambiguous. What is important for my purposes is that we can sharply distinguish the different functions of idealistic models at the level of analysis, whatever the case may be in practice. Indeed, we must distinguish between these different functions if we are to think clearly about the usefulness of idealistic models for each type of function. Allowing the various functions to remain muddled, as they often are in practice, has the following drawback: when thinking about the usefulness of idealistic models for normative purposes, we can't be sure that we aren't tacitly drawing on our thinking about their usefulness for conceptual purposes and *vice versa*. My classification scheme has the advantage of defining clear analytical categories while permitting actual practice to remain ambiguous.

2.3 Subject and scope: a definitive statement

I have introduced two distinctions to frame my inquiry: that between *principles* and (idealistic) *models*; and that between a *normative* function of a model and a *conceptual* function. With this framework in place, I give a definitive statement of the questions I will pursue, contrasting my inquiry with existing debates about ideal theory.

As I have said several times, I will organize my inquiry around two questions: Can idealistic models perform a normative function? and, Can idealistic models perform a conceptual function? We can now state these more precisely.

My first question is: Can idealistic model scenarios — in virtue of being designated ideal — supply us with reasons to accept particular normative principles as authoritative for some purpose? This question deviates in subtle but significant ways from the questions that frame existing debates about ideal theory. Existing

²²On the motivational function of ideals, see (e.g.) Berteau Forthcoming; Jones 2022.

debates often conflate several questions (see the appendix below). Even still, they tend to revolve around some version of the following: Can principles that characterize the normatively significant features of a perfectly just or otherwise ideal society guide political action or evaluation in some way? Is investigating the normatively significant features of normatively idealized societies an appropriate method for figuring out which principles we should use to guide political action or evaluation? Unlike the first of these, my question is not about the normative uses of principles, but about the use of *models* to justify our acceptance of the principles we use to guide our thinking about politics (including our thinking about what to do). This deviation implies that debates about the normative virtues or vices of certain kinds of principles do not bear on my inquiry. I allow that we may be justified in using certain principles that, as a matter of fact, characterize an idealistic model. My question focuses on whether a particular kind of consideration — namely, the fact (if it is one) that a principle reflects an idealistic model — can supply a reason to accept that principle for the purpose of guiding our normative thinking. Even if the answer to this question is “No,” other considerations may justify our acceptance of such a principle.

My first question is superficially similar to the question about whether investigating idealized societies is a useful method for justifying our acceptance of normative principles, but my approach to answering this question shifts its focus in an important way. Existing answers to this question focus on the virtues and vices of *idealistic* models. Following my observation above that particular model scenarios — idealistic or otherwise — can perform a normative function only if we have reasons to designate them as ideal, I will instead focus on attributes of the reasoning by which theorists designate particular model scenarios *as ideal* and consider what these attributes imply for our answer to my first question. Hence, unlike existing skepticism about ideal theory, I do not raise any skepticism about *idealistic* models in particular. This is for good reason: in chapters 8 and 9, I will argue that idealistic models can contribute to our normative thinking in important ways *because they are idealistic*.

As I have made clear to this point, I will answer my first question with a skeptical “No.” Beyond expressing skepticism about the value of idealizations, there are two types of skeptical answers one might develop here. The first, and perhaps most intuitive, is to assume a particular model has been designated as an ideal and show that there is some reason to question inferences from the features of this model (whatever they are) to a claim about the principles we are justified in accepting for some normative purpose. The second is to cast doubt on the possibility of justifiably designating any particular model scenario as ideal. My skeptical argument will develop the second type of challenge. Others have developed analogous skeptical challenges to ideal theory, most notably Gerald

Gaus and David Schmidtz.²³ Whereas Schmidtz doubts the existence of perfectly just societies and Gaus questions our epistemic access to societies that are quite unlike the ones we have observed in our world, my version of this challenge will show why the form of reasoning theorists use to designate a model as ideal is liable to be indeterminate. In view of this indeterminacy, claims that a particular model is ideal are liable to be arbitrary — that is, lacking a principled basis — and, thus, unjustified. Put simply, we should doubt claims to have identified particular models as ideal — whether they are supposed to represent solutions to real-world problems or distant utopian societies.

Here, then, is a more precise statement of my

Skeptical Claim: Models that are upheld as *ideal* do not, *in virtue of being designated ideal*, supply reasons to accept particular principles as authoritative for some normative purpose.

I will not, in fact, prove this claim. Instead, I will show that political theorists face a substantial burden of proof to show that this *Skeptical Claim* is false, one that cannot be discharged using the standard methods of normative political theory. Strictly speaking, then, I will argue that we should adopt a skeptical stance toward any (allegedly) ideal model identified as such using the standard methods of political theory. In effect, I will argue that we should adopt this *Skeptical Claim* as a basic methodological assumption.

Having shown that we should doubt whether any particular model scenario has a justified claim to the title “ideal,” I turn to my second question: Can idealistic model scenarios — in virtue of being *idealistic* — be useful for interpreting and operationalizing the conceptual content of the terms we use to describe and evaluate political events and outcomes? This question connects with existing debates about what normative theorists can take away from idealistic models. But I deviate from these debates insofar as they focus on the virtues and vices of such models for specifically normative purposes. I will instead focus on their virtues and vices for conceptual purposes — indeed, whether they can serve such purposes *without also performing a normative function*. A good part of my discussion of this question will highlight how idealistic models can serve conceptual purposes simply in virtue of their attributes as *models*. However, an answer that proceeds wholly along such lines evades my second question. So I end by considering how, given their *idealistic* attributes, such models can help political theorists interpret and operationalize the content of political concepts. This inquiry culminates in qualified support for the use of idealistic models for conceptual purposes.

²³Gaus 2016; Schmidtz 2011.

Here, then, is a more precise statement of my

Supportive Claim: *Idealistic* model scenarios can help us interpret and operationalize the conceptual content of candidate principles; this, in turn, helps us think more clearly about our reasons for accepting a particular principle.

A quick warning before I continue. Until I finally deliver my skeptical conclusion (in chapter 6), I will simply assume that some models have a justifiable claim to the title “ideal”. Accordingly, I will use the term “ideal model” somewhat loosely to simplify my exposition. Doing so will allow me to avoid annoying readers with the phrase “allegedly ideal model” and similar reminders that I take it to be an open question whether any model can be justifiably designated as an ideal. My focus in the next several chapters is on (allegedly) ideal models anyway, so loose usage should not create too much confusion. Once we have reached my skeptical conclusion, I will explicitly and definitively switch over to talking exclusively about “idealistic models.”

2.4 Appendix: For, against, and beyond “ideal theory”

This appendix is addressed to readers who think I have discarded “ideal theory” talk too quickly. I survey some of the main lines of debates about ideal theory as a way to motivate my rejection of that idiom in this book. Those who are ready to follow me in abandoning “ideal theory” can safely skip ahead to the next chapter.

Contributors to debates about ideal theory can be roughly divided into two groups. *Supporters* argue that ideal theory is useful for achieving some purpose that political theorists care about, while *skeptics* argue that ideal theory is not useful for achieving certain purposes. Setting skeptics aside for a moment, we can further divide supporters’ arguments into three subgroups. First, some supporters argue that ideal theory serves a *prescriptive* purpose: it depicts the features of a society that we should take practical steps to realize, although perhaps only approximately.²⁴ Second, some supporters argue that ideal theory serves an *evaluative* purpose: it specifies criteria that we can use to make comparative assessments about which social and political possibilities are better than others, thereby enabling us to rank some set of possibilities.²⁵ Third, some supporters argue that ideal theory serves a *judicial* purpose: it provides a standard of right

²⁴See, for example, Berg 2019; Buchanan 2004, 60ff; Gilabert 2017; Laurence 2021, chaps. 2–3; Robeyns 2008, 2012; Shelby 2016, 11–13; Simmons 2010.

²⁵See, for example, Boot 2012; Erman and Möller 2022; Estlund 2016; García Gibson 2016; Hamlin and Stemplowska 2012; Sangiovanni 2008*b*; Swift 2008.

by which we judge, from a specified normative perspective (e.g., justice), the propriety or acceptability of institutional arrangements, social practices, or patterns of behavior.²⁶ Some supporters argue that ideal theory can serve more than one purpose at a time. For instance, Pablo Gilabert argues that ideal theory can serve both a prescriptive and an evaluative purpose, and there is some evidence that Rawls thinks his ideal theory can serve all three purposes.²⁷ Other supporters argue that ideal theory can serve one of these three purposes without accepting that it can serve others and, in some cases, denying that it can do so. Adam Swift is an example of the former: he thinks that ideal theory serves an evaluative purpose without saying anything about whether it can also depict a society we should aim to realize; G.A. Cohen and David Estlund are examples of the latter: they think that ideal theory provides a standard of right while also thinking that we should not necessarily aim to realize ideal theoretic principles.²⁸ There are, to be sure, nuanced differences among specific arguments that fall within any of these broad categories. But these need not detain us here, for reasons that will become apparent below.²⁹

We might use the three subgroups above to organize skeptics' arguments too. Some skeptics argue that we should not use ideal theory to specify a goal for real-world political action.³⁰ Some skeptics argue that we should not use ideal theory to specify principles for comparatively evaluating social possibilities.³¹ Finally, some skeptics argue that we should not use ideal theory to specify a standard of right.³² But this is not the most useful way to organize skeptical arguments because skeptics typically limit their attention to prescriptive and evaluative purposes, and they often emphasize reasons for skepticism that cut across these purposes. One type of skeptical argument contends that ideal theory is *unnecessary* or *redundant* for practical purposes: careful thinking about the kind of normative theory we need to evaluate our options for addressing real-world injustice and identifying improvements reveals that ideal theory has nothing valuable to contribute.³³ A related type of skeptical argument contends

²⁶See, for example, Adams Forthcoming; Cohen 2008, 251–254; Estlund 2020, chap. 10; Mason 2004; Moen 2022; Stemplowska 2008.

²⁷Gilabert 2012; Rawls 1999*b*, 8, 216.

²⁸Swift 2008; Cohen 2008, 251–254, 266–272; Estlund 2020, chaps. 10, 13–14.

²⁹There are also supportive views about the purpose of ideal theory that seem to fall between the cracks of these categories. For example, Ismael's (2016) claim that ideal theory presents an analysis of normative concepts, or McKean's (2017) claim that an ideal theory provides an "orientation" (also Thakkar 2018). I will address these views in chapter 8.

³⁰Barrett 2020; Gaus 2016; Sen 2009; Wiens 2015*a,b*; cf. Estlund 2020, chap. 14.

³¹Barrett 2023; Wiens 2015*a*, 2023; cf. Farrelly 2007; Mills 2005.

³²Barrett 2022; Huemer 2016; Levy 2016; cf. Schmidtz 2011.

³³Barrett 2023; Sen 2009; Wiens 2012, 2015*a*, 2023.

that ideal theory *distorts* our practical thinking: ideal theory systematically misleads our thinking about how to effectively address real-world injustice because it obscures the causes of injustice and neglects important constraints on real-world political action.³⁴ A third type of skeptical argument contends that identifying the features of an ideal society is *beyond our epistemic capacities*: the complexity of social systems makes it exceedingly difficult to gain a reasonably comprehensive understanding of how actual societies work; accordingly, we should place little stock in ideal-theoretic speculations about the desirability of hypothetical societies that are unlike real-world societies in important ways.³⁵ A final type of skeptical argument contends that talk of an ideally just society is *incoherent*: justice is a concept that applies to situations that are marked by the kinds of social and political conflict typically set aside by ideal theorists.³⁶

Cutting across the organizational fault lines sketched above, we can distinguish between process-based arguments and product-based arguments for and against ideal theory.³⁷ *Process-based* arguments focus on the value or purpose of reflecting on the normatively significant features of idealistic social and/or political scenarios — for example, situations in which citizens and political leaders are intrinsically motivated to comply with their moral duties, or situations in which oppressive social hierarchies are absent, or situations in which the threat of socially destructive conflict is negligible. Supportive process-based arguments contend that reflecting on idealistic scenarios can expose and clarify normative insights that are useful for specifying an aim for political action or for specifying principles for comparatively evaluating reform options.³⁸ Skeptical process-based arguments contend that reflecting on idealistic scenarios is misguided for one of the skeptical reasons outlined in the previous paragraph (e.g., it is unnecessary for uncovering practically useful normative insights, or it distorts our practical thinking, and so on).³⁹

³⁴Anderson 2010, 3–7; Farrelly 2007; Mills 2017, chaps. 5, 9; Schmidtz 2011. Warnings against approximating ideals fall in this category; see, e.g., Brennan and Pettit 2005; Estlund 2020, chap. 14; Goodin 1995; Wiens 2016, 2020.

³⁵Barrett 2020; Gaus 2016; Gaus and Hankins 2017; Nili 2018; cf. Rosenberg 2016; Wiens 2015*b*. This type of argument is usually directed at the claim that ideal theory serves a prescriptive purpose, but it implies skepticism about the possibility of saying anything credible about what the attributes of an ideal society are and, if we can't do that, then ideal theory can't be useful for evaluative or judicial purposes either.

³⁶Freiman 2017; Huemer 2016; Levy 2016; Schmidtz 2011, 2018; cf. Monaghan 2022.

³⁷Erman and Möller (2022) and Stone (2021) prompted me to recognize this distinction.

³⁸Estlund 2020; Erman and Möller 2022; Lawford-Smith 2010; Plunkett 2021; Swift 2008; Táfwò 2023.

³⁹Anderson 2009; Farrelly 2007; Mills 2017, chaps. 5, 9; O'Neill 1996, chap. 2; Schwartzman 2006, chap. 2.

In contrast with process-based arguments, *product-based* arguments focus on the value or purpose of a characterization of an ideal society, considered as a product (i.e., output) of theoretical reflection. Supportive product-based arguments contend that a characterization of an ideal society depicts an aim for real-world action or a standard by which to judge non-ideal social possibilities.⁴⁰ Skeptical product-based arguments contend that a characterization of an ideal society is useless for these purposes, again, for one of the skeptical reasons outlined above (i.e., it is unnecessary, misleading, beyond our epistemic capacities, or incoherent).⁴¹ As if things aren't complicated enough, we find two types of product discussed in product-based arguments. Some focus on *principles* that characterize the normatively significant features of an ideal society, while some focus on *models* that depict the institutional arrangements of an ideal society; some discuss both principles and models, sometimes without clearly distinguishing the two.⁴²

We can devise other ways of organizing these debates.⁴³ But I do not wish to provide a comprehensive or definitive map of the existing literature. Instead, I want to make clear that debates about the value or purpose of ideal theory constitute a large and variegated terrain, covering a wide range of theoretical tasks and tools. The full range of possible questions within this area can be produced by identifying distinct combinations of positions along the organizational fault lines sketched above. Here is just a sample of the questions one might pursue with respect to the value or purpose of ideal theory:

- Are models of ideal institutional arrangements necessary for specifying the proper aims of real-world political action?
- Do principles that characterize an ideal society distort our thinking about the proper aims of real-world political action?
- Does the process of analyzing models of ideal institutional arrangements reveal normative insights that are useful for specifying comparative normative principles?
- Are principles that characterize an ideal society suitable for comparing non-ideal social possibilities?

⁴⁰Robeyns 2008; Sangiovanni 2008*b*; Valentini 2009

⁴¹Phillips 1985; Sen 2009; Wiens 2015*a*, 2023.

⁴²*Principles*: Robeyns 2008; Stemplowska 2008; *models*: Sen 2009; Swift 2008; *both*: Anderson 2009; Farrelly 2007; Mason 2004; Valentini 2009.

⁴³See Hamlin and Stemplowska 2012; Stemplowska and Swift 2012; Valentini 2012, 2017.

- Do principles that characterize an ideal society constitute a coherent standard of justice?
- Is the process of analyzing models of ideal institutional arrangements coherent?

Despite appearances, inquiries about any one of these (and related) questions do not obviously speak to the others, not directly at least. For example, it could well be that principles that characterize an ideal society do not distort our thinking about the proper aims of real-world political action while models of ideal institutional arrangements are nonetheless unnecessary for specifying such principles and, in turn, for specifying practical aims. For another example, models of ideal institutional arrangements may be misleading as a benchmark for comparing non-ideal possibilities while the process of analyzing such models nonetheless reveals normative insights that are useful for specifying comparative principles. Regrettably, theorists do not typically observe the differences between these questions, presenting arguments that conflate distinct issues as a result. This creates the impression that theorists talking about ideal theory are often talking past each other, which makes it difficult to see how one might enter these debates productively. Indeed, there may be a growing sense that progress on the broader question of the value or purpose of ideal theory has stalled.

I do not intend to survey existing debates in any further detail, indicating who says what on which question and determining whether what has been said withstands critical scrutiny. Nor do I intend to pick out one or two questions covered by existing debates as “central” or otherwise “important.” I have presented this brief literature survey to motivate my thought that we can make progress on questions about the value or purpose of idealistic political thought by sidestepping the existing terms of debate. To this end, I have simply stipulated the terms of my inquiry, investigating the central questions that emerge within the scope defined by these terms. No doubt, my inquiry falls somewhere within the broad terrain covered by existing debates; my questions and the terms on which I will investigate them are related to the ways in which others have approached questions about ideal theory. In the coming chapters, I will indicate the most important connections between my inquiry and existing debates when doing so will clarify my exposition and prevent unnecessary confusion. But I will not go on at length trying to identify all the points where my inquiry converges or diverges from existing debates, especially where such discussions are liable to invite unproductive distractions or otherwise bog down my exposition.

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