What is an ideal theory in political philosophy?

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Abstract. I present two senses in which a political philosophy may be an ideal theory. They are not identified by Laura Valentini, in her much-cited paper. The paper is written as a pastiche of the writing style of the distinguished legal and political philosopher Joseph Raz, who recently passed away, with my notes at the foot of the page within square brackets.

The characterization of a theory as ideal, given ordinary usage, is evaluative. The theory is praised as ideal. It is much as a couple evaluating houses to purchase may say of one they are viewing that it is ideal. Theories which specify general principles which the government should aim to implement are, in some cases, characterized as ideal. This usage can be continuous with ordinary usage, but the vocabulary of political philosophy is not necessarily continuous. The vocabulary within a field partly or wholly overlaps with widely used vocabulary, but is also prone to having senses fixed by local considerations. Two senses in which a theory can be judged ideal are identified below, both of which are descriptive senses, available to opponents of the theory.

Ideal form. The description of a theory of government principles as ideal theory is a description that can also be used to characterize theories in other fields of research. Ideal theories also exist in economics and anthropology, in one sense. A field, or a subset of researchers within a field, places a high value on theories which take a specific form, with criteria used to specify the form. One may describe the researchers as pursuing ideal theory and as ideal a theory that meets their criteria. Consider an agent who has strong intuitions about what the government

should do, that it should not become fascist for example. They also have weaker intuitions, of which they are less certain, for example that fascist family members should be disowned. If two theories both fit with the agent's stronger intuitions, in that the principles of both entail these intuitions, they prefer the theory that is simpler: theory 1 relies on three principles, of high generality and is embraced, whereas theory 2, with its reliance on sixteen, three of which concern situations that rarely obtain, is set aside. Rival theories are not instead decided between by how well they fit with weaker intuitions. Simplicity of form is accorded priority.[1]

These reflections on ideal theory may be summarized as follows:

(i)   Among researchers, or a subset of researchers, criteria develop for evaluating theories, which include criteria for which form should be prioritized, for example the form of simple general principles.

(ii)   Theorists who aspire to meet the criteria are said to be doing ideal theory.

(iii)   A theory which meets the criteria can be described as an instance of an ideal theory.

No revisions. An ideal theory may have no counterparts in other fields in a second sense. The theory specifies which principles institutions should seek to implement. In formulating an ideal, one is sensitive to intuitions which one is more certain of, and also perhaps ones which carry less certainty from one's point of view. Even if only the more certain are accorded a place in justifications, a theorist can develop an ideal based on them and think it could be a mistaken,[2] including a procedure for revision within their design. A liberal procedure is based on principles concerning when and how to engage in revision of principles, and these revisionary principles are part of one's total theory. An example of a revisionary principle is one which demands a vote

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[1] [The value of simplicity is referred to by Klemens Kappel, but not with the alternative of turning to weaker intuitions to decide between theories. See 2006.]

[2] [The second sense of ideal theory is thus not captured by Valentini's distinction between end state and transitional theories. There are end state theories which ignore and ones which do not ignore the possibility of being mistaken.]

on whether to continue if enough signatories support the vote. But an ideal theory does not include a revisionary procedure in the second sense, or associated principles.[3] An omniscient figure's theory would, we can presume, be ideal in this sense.

References

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Valentini, L. 2012. Ideal vs. Non-Ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map. *Philosophy Compass* 7: 654-664.

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[3] [The idea of a non-adaptable constitution is discussed by Raz himself (1986: 126).]