Review: Laurence, *Agents of Change*

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Ben Laurence: *Agents of Change: Political Philosophy in Practice*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021. Pp. 256.)

Ben Laurence defends the Rawlsian idea that political philosophers should proffer "realistically utopian" theories of justice. A theory of justice is *utopian* if it consists of principles of justice that are not "compromised by pragmatic considerations" (2) and "do not bend to accommodate people's morally reprehensible motives and unjust dispositions" (168); it is *realistic* if it characterizes an end that is "possible to achieve" given "the facts of human psychology and biology, including our characteristic foibles and vulnerabilities," and given "the material and historical conditions of our social world" (32). A successful defense aims to reconcile two apparently conflicting ideas: that a theory of justice characterizes an ideal social situation in which people are "freed from the evils of marginalization, exploitation, oppression, and domination" (32); and that a theory of justice presents a "practical good [. . .] that is meant to serve as a reference point for making political decisions" in the real world (31). Laurence is not the first to try to square this circle (he acknowledges John Simmons and Pablo Gilabert, among others). But his is a thorough discussion full of distinctive ideas that repay careful consideration. Personally, I found Laurence's arguments in chapters 4 through 6 the most illuminating: chapter 4 shows why so-called "nonideal theory" (i.e., our theorizing about what to do amidst injustice) must identify and be addressed to determinate agents that are able to mitigate or eliminate specific injustices and thereby achieve progress toward a just society; chapter 5 shows

why any theory of justice must say something about how to justly respond to wrongdoing and, thus, must account for some level of noncompliance with duties of justice; chapter 6 clarified and deepened my understanding of David Estlund's defense of "hopeless nonconcessive theories" in his *Utopophobia*.

Laurence's starting point is that debates about ideal theory have gone astray because participants have followed Rawls in conflating two conceptions of ideal theory. According to the *compliance conception*, principles of justice depict "right relations between members of society," which we identify by analyzing an idealized society in which "institutions and individuals are assumed to comply flawlessly with what justice requires" (11; also 27–31). According to the *teleological conception*, principles of justice characterize "the idea of a just society as a practical good to be pursued in our political action," with nonideal theory prescribing steps "toward this end in conditions where the end is not yet in reach" (12; also 31–6). According to Laurence, if we put these two conceptions together, we get the thought that political agents in the actual world should aim to realize a society in which institutions and individuals strictly comply with the demands of justice (37). But we have strong reasons to believe that realizing such a society is not practicable (39–40). In the face of this conflict, Laurence thinks we should retain the teleological conception (chaps. 2–4) and discard the compliance conception (chap. 5).

Laurence structures his discussion as a series of replies to two opposed types of critic. On one side, *practicalists* such as Elizabeth Anderson, Charles Mills, and Amartya Sen agree with Laurence that principles of justice should provide practical guidance but, following this thought, they deny that an ideal theory of justice can guide our efforts to address and overcome real-world injustices; a practical theory of justice must focus on diagnosing the injustices we observe and comparing feasible solutions with respect to their desirability and efficacy (2–3, 12–3, 45–9). On the other side, *antipracticalists* such

as G.A. Cohen, David Estlund, and Adam Swift agree with Laurence that principles of justice should be utopian (in the sense defined above) and, following this thought, they deny that principles of justice must provide practical guidance; an ideal theory of justice must present truths about justice without regard for the possibility of their realization in the actual world (2, 12, 41–5, 167–70). To practicalists, Laurence basically says: we can reject the compliance conception of ideal theory without thereby rejecting the teleological conception (chap. 5), and principled theorizing about what to do amidst injustice must be guided by an idea of a just society (see 77–95 for the details, which I bracket due to space limitations). Laurence responds to antipracticalists by arguing that a theory of justice we have no hope of satisfying fails as a theory of justice because our thinking about justice is intertwined with the idea of practical necessity (see esp. 55–69, 177–95).

There is much worth discussing in the book, but here I limit myself to briefly suggesting that Laurence's view is utopian in name only and, thus, closer to the practicalist view than he admits. (I set aside Laurence's discussion of Sen's comparativism because it's not endorsed by practicalists generally.) Stated most generally, the teleological view says that our nonideal theorizing should be guided by a theory of justice, which specifies an end for practical action. Put this way, practicalists can (and some do) accept the teleological view. Elizabeth Anderson, for example, does exactly this in taking a racially integrated democratic society as a practical end. What practicalists reject is the thought that practical action should aim at an *ideally* just society or be guided by an *ideal* theory of justice. They argue instead that we must be guided by a theory of justice that is informed by an empirical understanding of obstacles to the realization of normative values, including empirically salient forms of noncompliance (see, e.g., Anderson's remarks in *The Imperative of Integration* [Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010], pp. 3–7). Unsurprisingly, they reject the thought that our nonideal theorizing should

be guided by anything like a strict compliance theory of justice. Laurence "joins their cause" here (144). On Laurence's view, our nonideal theorizing should be guided by a theory that assumes all those forms of noncompliance that are compatible with "the idea of a just society" (161). This sounds to me like something that practicalists can accept, depending on where we draw the line between which forms of noncompliance are to be accounted for and which are to be excluded from consideration. On this point, Laurence only says that the line "will be exactly at the point where our theory withdraws the claim that the society in question is just" (161f). But nowhere, so far as I can tell, does he explain why we should think of the resultant theory of justice as ideal or utopian in a way that practicalists ordinarily reject; he merely labels it as such. We might look to his arguments for the teleological view (chaps. 2–4) for the required explanation, but these only show that our nonideal theorizing should aim at and be informed by a normatively desirable end—there is nothing specific about why that end must be thought of as ideal nor in what sense it must be so. Since I have yet to see how the substance of Laurence's teleological view entails the kind of ideal or utopian end that practicalists ordinarily reject, it appears he simply treats "theory of justice" and "just society" as synonyms for "ideal theory" and "realistic utopia" without explanation. But this does little to relieve the tension between practicalism and utopianism. Without further details, it seems Laurence has simply sided with the practicalists.