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Academic Foresights

Ideal and Non-Ideal Theory in International Ethics



How do you analyze the present situation of ideal and non-ideal theory in international ethics?

How can we bridge the gap between ideal theory and the non-ideal conditions of world politics? This question is of fundamental importance inasmuch as the theoretical and practical relevance of international ethics in political philosophy depends on the possibility of demonstrating that we should and can uphold an ideal moral point of view in order to better assess, understand and hopefully address, in real concrete terms, the contemporary issues of the international sphere.

This distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory underlies the classical tension in philosophy between theory and praxis. We doubtlessly owe to Rawls the most acute formulation of the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory in contemporary political philosophy. For Rawls, the idealization of agents that will fully comply with principles of justice characterizes the level of ideal theory concerned with the determination of just interactions between agents as well as interactions between agents and just institutions. The acknowledgement of noncompliance defines the aims of non-ideal theory such as the determination of fair principles of proportionate measures to be taken against agents unwilling to behave justly and duties of assistance toward agents unable to behave justly because they are burdened by unfavorable conditions. (1)

There has been a growing literature on this topic and I will merely summarize what I view as some of the most interesting contributions in order to later characterize my own understanding of the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory. At one extreme, we find authors that are skeptical of the pertinence of ideal theory altogether. According to Miller (2), Farrelly (3) and Sen (4) (among others), the task of political theory is to define justice or design efficient policies following a fact-dependant, comparative stance that rejects the epistemological status of a transcendental viewpoint. Although, following O'Neill's (5) distinction between abstraction and idealization necessary

Following Cohen's (5) distinction between abstraction and idealization, necessary abstractions are always involved in any form of theorization, it is the idealization of selected features of agents, peoples, states, and/or the rules of the market, etc that distort the characterization of the circumstances of justice in the first place, condemning ideal theories of justice to wander off following erroneous biases and false assumptions built in to their very core. Philipps (6) suggests (along with Mills (7)) that on the pretence of ascribing neutral predicates (concerning human nature, agent's motivations, conceptions of the market), liberal thinkers have rather surreptitiously introduced ideological biases. In Goodin's view (8), although political and moral ideals are necessary in order to challenge conventional wisdom and offer a critical standpoint against real world status quo, the danger of fetishizing ideal theory amounts to dismissing second-best options that are, in fact, valuable and available intermediate alternatives to utopia.

At the other end of the spectrum, a platonic understanding of the role of philosophy in the search for truth will undoubtedly confer a lexical priority to ideal theory. This stand is mostly attributed to Cohen (9), although Singer – who is certainly not of platonic obedience - would also qualify as a prominent defender of ideal theory in my view. Without being able to address Cohen's critique of Rawls's constructivism here (10), I will simply assert for the time being that Rawls's epistemological justification of coherentism is warranted, hence the logical recourse to reflective equilibrium in the development of ideal theory (which, as Daniels (11) argues, can guard us from those ideological biases that we are able to detect in the process) and the necessity to reconcile ideal theory with non-ideal considerations in political philosophy.

In your opinion, how will the situation likely evolve over the next five years?

It is in this more or less wide intermediate zone opened by Rawls, covering the various and important contributions of Estlund (12), Gilabert (13), Valentini (14), Ypi (15) and others, that I wish to situate my own understanding of the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory. Ideal theory is a fundamental, inescapable task for political theory if any critical stand can be adopted in order to assess, judge, or compare in evaluative terms any given behaviors, institutional designs, principles of foreign policy or set of domestic policies in the real world. In this regard, ideal theorization rests on justified epistemological ground and plays a fundamental critical and normative function. The complete rebuttal of ideal theory solely in the name of empirical methodology and political realism leads to at least two defeating problems.

First, to address Sen, his way of depicting the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory in terms of either comparative or transcendental approaches to social justice is misleading. From an epistemological point of view, critical judgment needs to anchor itself in normative soil that needs not be transcendental *à la* Cohen (with all due respect). Indeed, a coherentist perspective according to which transcendental truth about justice will forever escape from our limited epistemic reach can nevertheless give way to a refined version of reflective equilibrium able to yield an ideal theory of justice against which we can actually assess, compare, and evaluate existing social schemes. Secondly, to address Miller, the fetishization of fact-dependant methodology leads not only to the naturalistic fallacy (“what is becomes what ought to be” (16)) but actually introduces a greater danger of unquestioned ideological biases in the so-called “lucid” description of facts upon which we will tailor the limits of non-ideal theories of justice in the name of (complacent) realism. As the feminist scholar Tickner (17) convincingly argued against Morgenthau’s political realism in international studies, the mere selection of what counts as objective facts and the salient features of the so-called real world is never truly value-free and reveals instead ideological spots to which we are blind.

However, political philosophers do have a tendency to rely exclusively on ideal theory, completely oblivious to crucial knowledge about the empirical constraints of the real world. Utopophobia, as Estlund calls it, rests seemingly on a legitimate reproach against philosophers (even though, as it turns out, phobic reaction to ideal theory is as irrational as any phobia). But the value of the much discussed distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory rests precisely on the importance of signaling the limited practical scope of utopia (cf. Rawls) or the dangers of succumbing to self-defeating revolutions without any regards to second best options (cf. Goodin), on the necessity of thinking through the normative criteria guiding transitions (Gilbert), or the necessity of fleshing out the normative criteria of acceptable trade-offs in order to avoid rotten compromises (following Margalit (18) loosely here). In the next 5 years or so, I believe that interdisciplinary research among economists, political scientists, international lawyers, health care professionals and political philosophers will certainly trace the pathway to follow in this regard. Pogge’s institutional perspectives on cosmopolitanism (19), along with publications such as Archibugi & Held’s *Cosmopolitan Democracy: An Agenda for a New World* (20) and Pierek & Werner’s *Cosmopolitanism in Context: Perspectives from International Law and Political Theory* (21) are certainly examples (just to name a few) to follow. Recent volumes in the field of global public health (22) and international law also pave the way for promising interdisciplinary exchanges (23).

What are the structural long-term perspectives?

However, I will now depart from Rawls's formulation as well as from this rich literature in order to suggest yet another way of presenting this distinction in the field of international ethics. Even if we wish to start from Rawls's first characterization of ideal and non-ideal theory based on the criteria of full or partial compliance, we should notice that the problem of noncompliance in international relations is mostly due to two salient features of the imperfect circumstances of the real world. First, the fact that non-moral motivations make up the real stuff of political rationality (the problem of limited motivational resources), and secondly, the fact that in the absence of world government, there are no mechanism of coercion binding all agents under common rules (the problem of limited institutional resources).

In numerous ways, we can also understand the cleavage between ideal and non ideal theory as an expression of the fundamental tension between ethics and politics. As one knows, the field of IR studies in political science is born from the clash of two schools of thought. Let me simply remind here that the advocates of a moral prospect in international relations promoted a kind of moral idealism of Kantian obedience, while the founders of political realism followed a Hobbesian view according to which excessive theoretical abstractions that do not sufficiently take into account the empirical characteristics of the non ideal world are bound to wander off, pointlessly, in metaphysical terrain. According to political realism, two undeniable facts of world politics must limit the scope of moral theory in IR. First, according to a Hobbesian view of political agency, rational and selfish actors are mainly, if not exclusively, driven by purely instrumental motivations (of strategic nature in order to obtain political or economical advantages for themselves in the context of competition for survival). Second, contrary to the domestic context, the international sphere is characterized by the absence of a legitimate monopoly of coercion able to force selfish states to abide to common rules. Obviously, the relation between morality and politics raises fundamental questions in international relations that cover the tension between theory and praxis, the gap between theoretical abstraction and empirical analysis. In other words, to what extent can we, philosophers, allow ourselves to prescribe normative constraints from a moral point of view in order to guide political actions in the name of global justice?

Sceptical critics doubt that one can elaborate a moral theory of global justice that will yield a feasible theory of political action in the international sphere. However, in the

domestic context (at least within liberal democracies), it is plausible to affirm that the domestic institutions are in part determined by principles of justice that are rooted in ethical justifications. It follows that the relation between morality and politics is not irreconcilable in itself within the framework of theories of social justice. Therefore, proponents of a moral scepticism in international relations must suppose that the international sphere is fundamentally distinct from all other fields of human behaviours and institutions, and that in virtue of its own nature and its structural conditions, an unequivocal exclusion of morality is as such justified. No one doubts that the tensions between morality and politics are exacerbated in the context of international relations, indeed distinct from domestic society from an institutional point of view, that include, in addition, individual and collective actors whose behaviours are driven by particular ends such as the pursuit of security, power and economic dominion in a context marked by conflicts. I subscribe, however, to the opposite position, according to which one must reject a purely instrumental conception of political rationality that is unable to take into account the moral residue that nevertheless characterizes our common understanding of human actions and society.

Setting off from this philosophical standpoint, the cosmopolitan approach to which I subscribe consists in analyzing world politics under the light of normative principles of global justice in order to critically assess the current state of affairs and eventually to guide political actions and institutional proposals. However, there is room to advance some important reservations about purely ideal normative theories that do not sufficiently take into account the problem of mixed motives and the problem of the institutional implementation of normative policies in the absence of world government. Indeed, certain interpretations of cosmopolitanism, in being excessively idealistic, court a sceptic's criticism, which would rightly doubt their theoretical and practical pertinence. In order to develop a feasible approach of cosmopolitanism, or a realistic Utopia (in Rawls terms albeit without sharing his own conclusions), what are the empirical characteristics of the non-ideal world that a plausible theory of global justice must internalize? In my view this way of formulating the question will characterize the structural long term perspectives in the field of international ethics in allowing us to better study how normative consensus may arise in the international context and give way to novel schemes of international cooperation.

To be sure, my contention does not consist in limiting cosmopolitan approaches to mere prudential considerations of feasibility. However, I do argue that theories of global justice that rely solely on moral epiphany need to investigate more closely the existing institutional features at the international level in order to bridge the gap between ideal

theory and the non-ideal world. In fact, the main point of my argument is to criticize the “realist reductionism” and to recognize the importance of moral considerations in international affairs. Contrary to the realist contention, I strongly believe that morality intervenes, one way or another, in world politics. From a philosophical point of view, the realist exclusive focus on rational instrumentality in order to explain political behaviors boils down to an inconsistent and incomplete account of human practical reason. And from a strategic point of view, our foreign policy principles must take into account that moral motivations may not always play a central role in the making of political decisions and conducts, but that to evacuate them completely from the realm of political deliberation always entails a costly price. In this regard, I believe that Joseph Nye’s important work on the notion of soft power (whether we agree or not with his views and his analysis of US foreign policy) states this point convincingly (24).

Advocates of cosmopolitanism should be interested to pursue the study of the institutional features and possibilities at the international level in order to bridge the gap between ideal and non-ideal theory. In putting the emphasis on the problem of mixed motivations and the absence of world government, moral theorization about world politics will be able to incorporate salient features of the non-ideal world in view of producing plausible theories of global justice that will hopefully guide feasible policy guidelines and institutional proposals.

Concerning the structural long-term perspectives, I wish to add one last remark. I believe scholars will eventually come to question the pertinence of upholding such a radical dichotomy either because there is no such thing as pure ideal theory in political theory (no political theory can fully abstract from context dependant considerations concerning human agency and the circumstances of justice, therefore, “ideal purity” is only a question of degree) or because fact dependency fetishism ultimately relies on (more or less conscious) idealized assumptions, built in our epistemological standpoints – as feminist perspectives on these epistemological questions remarkably pointed out. Some scholars would also argue that the distinction is not very clear in the first place since it seems to cover many different meanings.

In conclusion, should it be true that any coherent view about international politics and human behaviors in general must take into account both instrumental rationality and moral reasoning as I have tried to argue, I suspect that one major trend will be further developed in the field of international ethics. Recent academic endeavors in favor of reconciling realism, liberalism and constructivism will pave the way for novel

theoretical frameworks in the realm of international studies. The contention rests on the idea that power relations between states and non-state actors in international relations are inevitable facts that any useful normative theory should carefully factor in. However, the emergence of norms and the construction of reasons (stemming from instrumental rationality AND moral reasoning) bringing about normative consensus pertaining to rules of conducts, principles of international law and so forth are also fundamental aspects of human coexistence in the domestic, as well as in the international sphere. Some authors such as J. Samuel Barkin (25), Jeangène Vilmer (26) are trying to bridge the gap. Gallarotti's work on "the power curse" and "cosmopolitan power" is also a stimulating attempt to incorporate Nye's notion of soft power within an oecumenic approach to cosmopolitan power reconciling realist, neo-liberal and constructivist theories (27). These contributions are not merely attempts to please everyone, I believe they are genuine and promising efforts to shake the foundations of mainstream theoretical schools of thought which will have important structural impact in the following decade (28).

Notes:

- (1) Rawls J. (1999), *The Law of Peoples*, Cambridge : Harvard University Press.
- (2) Miller D. (2008), « Political Philosophy for Earthlings » in Leopold D. & Stears M. (eds), *Political Theory : Methods and Approaches*, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 29-48.
- (3) Farrelly C. (2007), « Justice in Ideal Theory : A Refutation », *Political Studies*, vol. 55, 844-864.
- (4) Sen A. (2006), « What do we want from a Theory of Justice », *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. CIII, no.5, 215-238.
- (5) O'Neill O. (1996), *Towards Justice and Virtue*, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 39-44. O'Neill O. (1987), « Abstraction, Idealization and Ideology in Ethics », in J.D.G. Evans (ed), *Moral Philosophy and Contemporary Problems*, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 55-69.
- (6) Phillips A. (2008), « Egalitarians and the Market : Dangerous Ideals », *Social Theory and Practice*, vol 34, no. 3, 439-462.
- (7) Mills C. (2005), « Ideal Theory as Ideology », *Hypatia*, vol. 20, no. 3, 165-84.
- (8) Goodin R.E. (1995), « Political Ideals and Political Practice », *British Journal of Political Science*, 25, 37-56.
- (9) Cohen G.A. (2003), « Facts and Principles », *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 31, no. 3, 211-245.
- (10) Cohen G.A. (2008), *Rescuing Justice & Equality*, Cambridge : Harvard University Press.
- (11) Daniels N. (1996), *Justice and Justification. Reflective Equilibrium in Theory and*

- (11) Daniels N. (1996), *Justice and Justification. Reflective Equilibrium in Theory and Practice*, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- (12) Estlund D. (2007), « Utopophobia : Concession and Aspiration in Democratic Theory », chap. XIV, *Democratic Authority : A Philosophical Framework*, Princeton : Princeton University Press.
- (13) Gilabert P. (2008), « Global Justice and Poverty Relief in Nonideal Circumstances », *Social Theory and Practice*, vol. 34, no. 3, 411-438.
- (14) Valentini L. (2009), « On the Apparent Paradox of Ideal Theory », *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 17, no. 3, 332-355.
- (15) Ypi L. (2010), « On the Confusion between Ideal and Non-ideal in Recent Debates on Global Justice », *Political Studies*, vol. 58, 536-555.
- (16) I'm borrowing Karl-Dieter's expression very loosely here. Karl-Dieter (2004), « What is always becoming what ought to be : how political action générâtes a participation norm », *European Sociological Review*, vol. 20, no.1, 13-29.
- (17) Tickner A.J. (1988), « Hans Morgenthau's Principles of Political Realism : A Feminist Reformulation », *Millenium*, vol. 17, no.3, 429-440.
- (18) Margalit A. (2010), *On Compromise and Rotten Compromises*, Princeton : Princeton University Press.
- (19) Thomas W. Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*, Cambridge : Polity Press, 2008 ; A. Hollis, T. Pogge, *The Health Impact Fund : Making New Medicines Accessible for All, Incentives for Global Health*, 2008.
- (20) Archibugi et Held (co-eds), *Cosmopolitan Democracy. An Agenda for a New World*, Polity, 1995.
- (21) Pierek & Werner (co-eds), *Cosmopolitanism in Context. Perspectives from International Law and Political Theory*, Cambridge, CUP, 2010.
- (22) Solomon Benatar & Gillian Brock (co-eds), *Global Health and Global Health Ethics*, Cambridge, CUP, 2011; Patti Tamara Lenard & Christine Straehle (co-eds), *Health Inequalities and Global Justice*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2012.
- (23) Besson & Tasioulas (co-eds), *The Philosophy of International Law*, Oxford, OUP, 2010; James Crawford & Martti Koskenniemi (co-eds), *The Cambridge Companion to International Law*, Cambridge, CUP, 2012.
- (24) As I briefly try to show in « Soft Power », *Encyclopedia of Global Justice*, Deen K. Chatterjee (ed), Springer, pp.1019-1021. And in a longer version (still work in progress) presented at ISA Montreal 2011, http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/5/0/3/0/4/pages503041/p503041-1.php
- (25) J. Samuel Barkin, « Realist Constructivism », *International Studies Review*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Sep., 2003), pp. 325-342 ; Barkin, *Realist Constructivism*, Cambridge, CUP, 2010.
- (26) Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer. "Pour un réalisme libéral en relations internationales".

Commentaire, 141, printemps 2013, p. 13-20.

(27) Giulio M. Gallarotti, *Cosmopolitan Power in International Relations: A Synthesis of Realism, Neorealism, and Constructivism*, Cambridge, CUP, 2010.

(28) This short English piece stems from an original, longer French version, « Théorie idéale et non idéale », chapitre 2, *Éthique des relations internationales. Problématiques contemporaines*, Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer et Ryoa Chung (co-dir.), Presses universitaires de France, forthcoming May 2013.

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