

The Debate on Feasibility in Ideal Theory

J. Ahlin Marceta

In broad terms, the debate on feasibility in ideal theory concerns practical constraints to idealizations in normative political philosophy. One way of understanding the topic is through the Kantian principle, “ought implies can;” should it be the case that a political ideal (or some element of it) is practically impossible to achieve, critics would argue that this practical constraint matters to the truth-status of the theory.

This short text treats three recent contributions to the debate on feasibility in ideal theory. First, I account for Nicholas Southwood’s argument that there is a plurality of “oughts,” and that under some of them “ought” implies “feasible” (2016). Then, I turn to a debate between David Estlund (2014, 2016) and David Wiens (2016, 2018). In short, Estlund argues that the truth about justice is not constrained by considerations of the likelihood of success in realizing it. Wiens replies that the demands of justice are constrained by what people are sufficiently likely to be motivated to do. Finally, I discuss two metatheoretical constraints on normative political principles that Eva Erman and Niklas Möller propose in a forthcoming article.

A plurality of “oughts”

Southwood asks the reader to consider a hypothetical polity, Pecunia, in which the economic position of the poor could be improved by progressive taxation (p. 7). But, the middle-class majority in Pecunia cannot bring themselves to work at that level of taxation, meaning that

an improved economic position of the poor (by means of taxation) is not feasible. In light of this setup, consider the following claim (ibid):

- (1) The Pecunians ought to improve the economic position of the poor by progressive taxation.

Many would share the intuition that (1) is *false*, as it demands the infeasible. On the other hand, (1) also seems to be *true*; it states what the Pecunians ought to do, irregardless of whether they would meet the moral demand. Thus, (1) is an example of the problem of feasibility which brings about an ambivalence or a conflict of intuitions.

Southwood argues that this conflict can be resolved by considering a plurality of “oughts” carrying different meanings. In a first sense, “oughts” can be *prescriptive*. Prescriptive ought-claims are moral requirements that are “constrained by what agents can bring themselves to do [and hence] by what is feasible for them to do” (p. 24). Under a prescriptive understanding of “ought,” (1) is thus false. In a second sense, “oughts” can be *evaluative*. Evaluative ought-claims “are supposed to be fit to be used by an appropriately situated evaluator in *evaluating*,” i.e., in assessing behavior (p. 25; emphasis in original). Under an evaluative understanding of “ought,” (1) is true; it would be morally wrong by the Pecunians not to adhere to (1). However, Southwood argues, the prescriptive and the evaluative “oughts” do not succeed in resolving the conflict in (1). But, two final “oughts” might.

In a third sense, “oughts” can be *deliberative*. Deliberative ought-claims “are supposed to be fit to be used in practices of (practical) *deliberation*,” (p. 28; emphasis in original). Under this understanding, “ought” implies “feasible,” which according to Southwood explains “the first part of our ambivalence in the face of normative claims that demand the infeasible” (p. 39). Finally, in a fourth sense, “oughts” can be *hypological*. “Claims involving the hypological ought are supposed to be capable of operating in the service of our *hypological* practices: our practices of directing *criticism* toward others and ourselves” (pp. 39–40).

The aim of criticism “is to hold one another (and ourselves) accountable,” irrespective of any feasibility constraints (p. 43). Thus, under this understanding, (1) can be true in spite of the fact that it is infeasible.

To conclude, Southwood’s arguments amount to the following view. Under a deliberative understanding, “ought” implies “feasible,” which explains our ambivalence with regard to (1). But, under a hypological understanding, it is yet right to hold the Pecunians morally accountable for their behavior. Thus, the ambivalence or conflict of intuitions in (1) can be resolved with a pluralist understanding of “oughts.”

Estlund vs. Wiens

In his 2014 article “Utopophobia,” Estlund argues in favor of the thesis that political theories “are not shown to have any defect in virtue of the fact, if it is one, that the alleged requirements or preconditions of these things are not likely ever to be met” (p. 114). Thus, his focus is on the notion of likelihood. More precisely, Estlund argues that “the truth about justice is not constrained by considerations of the likelihood of success in realizing it” (p. 115). However, he recognizes that the *value* of unrealistic theory is separate from its truth-status (p. 133). It may thus be the case that a true theory of justice is not valuable simply because it is unrealistic.

In a reply to Estlund, Wiens argues that “motivational deficiencies can constrain the demands of justice” (2016, p. 333). Wiens’s starting point is the following. Suppose that a theory of justice “requires people to optimise their productive output while earning the same income as everyone else” (p. 334). It can be objected that this requirement is beyond what people in general can be motivated to do. Simply put, the theory “requires a level of self-sacrifice that is beyond human motivational limits” and is therefore false (ibid). This leads Wiens to suggest a version of “ought implies can” that takes “can” to imply “likely enough to will (in good faith)” (p. 348). His formal proposal reads (p. 347):

A person is able to (can) ϕ if and only if she successfully completes a sequence of acts that manifests ϕ in a sufficiently high proportion of the possible worlds at which she repeatedly makes a good faith attempt to complete a sequence of acts that conduces to ϕ .

To this, Estlund replies that Wiens is unwarranted in referring to “good faith.” Instead, Estlund supports the following formulation (2016, p. 355):

A person is able to (can) [ϕ] if and only if, were she to try *and not give up*, she would tend to succeed.

In a final reply, Wiens clarifies his position and explains why his skepticism to Estlund’s formulation remains (2018, pp. 2–4).

Metatheoretical constraints on political principles

Erman and Möller argue that there is not one substantial account of feasibility constraints to be settled in political theory. Instead, they aim to elucidate contextual concerns by introducing two metatheoretical constraints on normative political principles (forthcoming, p. 7):

... a constraint in relation to what an intended normative political principle is aimed to regulate (the functional constraint), and a constraint in relation to how it fits together with the other principles, values and states of affairs which are endorsed in the account (the fitness constraint).

The functional constraint is “the requirement that the guiding principles of a normative account must be appropriate for what the account aims to do” (p. 8). Through the constraint, it is acknowledged that normative principles are context-relative. For instance, “a principle of strict distributive equality” might be just between siblings of a young age but not for a government (p. 9). The fitness constraint is “a requirement on the relationship among the commitments made within an

account” (pp. 9–10). For instance, if “a suggested principle of justice does not fit together with the fundamental moral principles and values subscribed to in the account,” the account is deficient (p. 10).

Through the two constraints Erman and Möller elucidate five aspects of relevance for feasibility constraints in a normative political theory. They call the first aspect the “principle-kind” aspect (pp. 11–4). The principle-kind aspect concerns whether a normative principle or account is appropriate for its intended *aims*. The second aspect is called the “practice-kind” aspect (pp. 14–6). It concerns whether a principle or account is right for its intended *practices*. The third is called the “temporal aspect,” and concerns *when* the principle is intended to come into effect (pp. 16–9). The fourth is called the “dynamic aspect,” suggesting that “different feasibility considerations may be appropriate for different principles *within* an account” (p. 20). Finally, the fifth aspect is called the “non-binary aspect.” It suggests that instead of viewing the ideal vs. non-ideal theory debate from a binary perspective, feasibility “should be seen as a continuum of different constraints that we may put on an account. From this perspective, ideal and non-ideal becomes a relational matter” (p. 24).

Concluding remarks

In this short text, I have accounted for Southwood’s argument that there is a plurality of “oughts,” and that under some of them “ought” implies “feasible.” I then turned to the debate between Estlund and Wiens on whether the truth-status of political theories are constrained by considerations of the likelihood of success in realizing it, and whether the demands of justice are constrained by what people are sufficiently likely to be motivated to do. Finally, I accounted for Erman and Möller’s two metatheoretical constraints on normative political principles. Together, the discussion should provide a brief overview of the various topics and complexities in the debate on feasibility in ideal theory.

References

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