

The Future of Political Philosophy: Non-Ideal and West of Babel

1. Introduction

Political philosophy arguably began with Plato's sketch of a utopian society in *The Republic*, but this length of practice implies nothing about a consensus surrounding what political philosophy is and how political philosophers should spend their time. Indeed, within the last decade or so, political philosophy has undergone something of a *methodenstreit* – an intense disagreement over the proper methodology of political philosophy. There has been talk of ideal versus non-ideal theory, end-state versus transitional theorizing, realism versus moralism, fact-sensitive versus fact-insensitive normative principles, and much more.

Perhaps foolishly, this paper tries to contribute to this growing debate on the methodology of political philosophy. To offer a new contribution to an old debate, though, requires one introduce a new framework or lens of analysis. To this end, the next section introduces a new way of carving up the political philosophy landscape. Beyond the simple ideal/non-ideal theory distinction (explicated in detail in the next section), we can – following economist Richard Wagner – distinguish between political philosophers who are *east of Eden* and those who are *west of Babel* (§2). East of Eden political philosophers – the current, dominant paradigm – articulate a guiding ideal end state for us to strive in pursuit of. West of Babel political philosophers – much less common – deny that such an end state exists. For them, there is only continual and unending disagreement and conflict. The job of the political philosopher is to propose ways of adjudicating such disputes so that we may live better together.

With this distinction in hand we can better carve up political philosophy's conceptual landscape (§3). After examining this space, only one paradigm remains standing as a tenable pursuit: non-ideal political philosophy that is west of Babel. Problematically, though, since most political philosophy does not fall into this category, it is unclear what political philosophy looks like when practiced in this manner. To end, the paper sketches what such a research program might look like, particularly what is left for the political philosopher working within such a research program to do (§4). Though radically different from political philosophy as traditionally

practiced, I believe this type of research agenda is the way forward, and, indeed, the future of the discipline.

2. Political Theorizing: A Conceptual Map

The central goal of political philosophy is, roughly, to tell us how we ought to organize our social and political institutions. One political philosopher might argue that we ought to implement democratic institutions, though political philosophers of old often argued in defense of monarchy. Other political philosophers might focus their attention on institutions related to distributive justice – that, for instance, we ought to have a basic income guarantee, or perhaps some version of free market capitalism, or maybe even market socialism.

In theorizing about what our institutions should look like political philosophers must make some kind of prediction concerning what effects the proposed institutions will likely have. No one would argue in favor of market socialism if they genuinely believed that it would radically impoverish the society it was implemented to serve. Indeed, it is these overall effects that lead philosophers to endorse particular institutions in the first place. A philosopher might argue in favor of one distributive policy over another because she believes the former is more likely to help those least advantaged in society when compared to the latter. In John Rawls's words, "all ethical doctrines worth our attention take consequences into account in judging rightness. One which did not would simply be irrational, crazy" (Rawls 1971: 30).

Political philosophy thus always entails some kind of predictive element, which implies some kind of predictive model working in the background, even if such a model is informal and rudimentary (as is often the case).¹ Though all political philosophers do in fact employ some kind of rudimentary predictive model in their theorizing,² one stark differentiating feature that carves up the political philosophy landscape concerns what kinds of assumptions such predictive models make use of. To see this, consider the following basic formula, adapted from Elinor Ostrom (1986: 3):

¹ Sometimes the political philosopher's predictive model is quite rigorous and explicit, however. For an example of this, see Kogelmann and Ogden (2018).

² Indeed, even political philosophers that might initially seem opposed to including such components slip them in the back door. On this point see Gaus (2016: xv-xvi).

$$\text{Institutions} + \text{Preferences} = \text{Outcomes} \quad (1)$$

The goal, recall, of the political philosopher is to prescribe certain institutions – democracy, monarchy, a basic income guarantee, free market capitalism, market socialism, etc. – and this is typically done by reference to the outcome such institutions produce: that such institutions will maximize the welfare of the least advantaged, that they will treat persons as free and equal, that they will allow persons to realize their autonomy, and so on.

But notice what our equation in (1) says: that institutions – *when coupled with preferences* – produce certain outcomes. Institutions alone don't produce outcomes; they do so only when persons act within them. But what kinds of preferences should we assume persons have when examining the effects of institutions? Another way of thinking about this question – perhaps more familiar to philosophers – is through the idea of human nature: what should we take human nature to be when examining the effects of different institutions? This question matters greatly. Institutions that produce overall good consequences when persons behave in a morally admirable fashion might induce disastrous consequences when persons behave wickedly.³ Given such variance, the political philosopher must be very careful when thinking about how she defines the preferences of the agents she appeals to in her theorizing.

There are two different schools of thought on this issue among political philosophers. Popular at the moment is what we shall call *ideal theory*.⁴ The ideal theorist, when she builds a predictive model of how certain institutions might operate, uses an aspirational model of the person, where some of our more unfortunate and morally questionable motivations and dispositions are assumed away. Persons, in other words, are assumed to be morally good. As an example of this, in his highly influential work Rawls assumes that “everyone is presumed to act justly and to do his part in upholding just institutions” (Rawls 1971: 8). More abstractly, David Estlund argues that “if there are facts of human nature... consisting in limits to what humans will

³ This is one of the central insights of the *robust political economy* research program. For an overview see Pennington (2011).

⁴ Ideal theory (and non-ideal theory as well) now means many things, and the way I employ the term in this paper is but one possible meaning. For an excellent overview of other ways of understanding the distinction, see Valentini (2012).

be able to muster the will to do, they are not, simply as facts, constraints on what can soundly be prescribed or morally required” (Estlund 2011: 207).⁵

In contrast to the ideal theorist is the non-ideal theorist, who treats “men as they are and laws as they might” (Rousseau 1762/1987: 17). The non-ideal theorist, rather than assuming an aspirational model of the individual for the purpose of predictive modeling, uses instead a realistic one. The individual in the model is meant to capture, as closely as possible, how persons *actually* act in the real world. This form of theorizing was more popular in the past – particularly during the Scottish Enlightenment – than it is today. As a few examples, Adam Smith highlighted the beneficial properties of the market even when persons are driven by self-interest; it is not “from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner but from their regard to their own interest” (Smith 1776/1981: 26-27). Smith’s contemporary, David Hume, implored us that “in contriving any system of government, and fixing the several checks and controls of the constitution, every man ought to be a supposed *knave*, and to have no other end, in all his actions, than private interest” (Hume 1741/1987: 42). As a final and contemporary example, James M. Buchanan asserted that it is “nothing more than simple and obvious wisdom to compare social institutions as they might be expected actually to operate rather than to compare romantic models of how such institutions might be hoped to operate” (Buchanan 1979/1999: 47).⁶

All of this should be familiar to the student of contemporary political philosophy – disagreement about how to model persons in our theorizing is one popular (but not the only) way of carving up the political philosophy landscape. Yet there is another way of carving up the landscape that is unfamiliar, that I would like to now introduce and explore. Doing so, I think, may open up new avenues of research and perhaps help us move beyond political philosophy’s current *methodenstreit*.

⁵ It is a simplification to argue that all ideal theorists (and all non-ideal theorists as well) adopt the *same* behavioral model. As an example of this, though Rawls’s behavioral model is certainly aspirational and deviates from how persons actually behave, some have criticized it for not being aspirational *enough* – he still lets some unfortunate aspects of human nature slip in. On this point see Cohen (2008: ch. 1). This diversity among ideal theorists (and non-ideal theorists as well) is inessential to the current paper’s central argument, so we shall ignore it.

⁶ Note that assuming persons are wicked and knaves does not necessarily imply that we are using an accurate model of human behavior. Just as the ideal theorist is *too optimistic*, it is possible to overcorrect and be *too pessimistic* as well. Non-ideal theory (as we have defined it) seeks an *accurate* model of human behavior. For more on this point as it relates to Buchanan’s work, see Kogelmann (2015); Kogelmann (2018: 27-28).

In an essay on the role of spontaneous order theorizing in the work of Gordon Tullock, economist Richard Wagner introduces a distinction between different “creation myths” social theorists employ in their work. In the words of Wagner, “every analysis of social dilemmas... invokes a creation myth to initiate and frame the analysis” (Wagner 2008: 64). We can think of these creation myths as nothing more than starting points; a creation myth is a set of presuppositions and assumptions that guide the theorist in her analysis. All analysis must begin somewhere, and different creation myths are just different ways of specifying these initial assumptions and commitments.

Wagner argues that there are two creation myths social theorists employ, though one is far more common than the other. The first creation myth says that we are *east of Eden*. According to Wagner, “the east of Eden motif envisions a concordant constitutional moment, with discord arising later during post-constitutional action” (Wagner 2008: 64). The general idea here is the assumption that there is some ideal state of affairs (an Eden) that persons are trying to get *to* (hence, we are east of it). This ideal state of affairs characterizes and frames the analysis. All social action can be viewed as trying to get to this ideal state, and all shortcomings of reaching Eden will be compared to the ideal state that we have failed to reach. An example of a theoretical tradition invoking this creation myth is, I think, welfare economics. There is an Eden that we are east of – the perfectly competitive market where all gains from trade have been exhausted and the resulting distribution is Pareto optimal – and this frames much of the analysis. We compare the current state of affairs to the ideal market, and recommendations are proffered so we may reach this Eden.

Much less popular among social theorists is the view *west of Babel*. In Wagner’s words: “This alternative motif is grounded in significant discord and not universal concord. The eight who disembarked from the Ark were a concordant lot; those who left Babel were a discordant mélange of humanity” (Wagner 2008: 64). The central presupposition of the west of Babel creation myth is that there is no ideal point that characterizes the analysis: we do not assume that persons are trying to get to an ideal state of affairs, nor do we assume there is some ideal baseline they have fallen short of. Rather, there is chaos, discord, and confusion all the way down. An example of west of Babel social theory is perhaps the Rochester school of political economy, applied to social choice theory specifically. In the words of William Riker: “Politics is the

dismal science because we have learned from it that there are no equilibria to predict. In the absence of equilibria we cannot know much about the future at all, whether it is likely to be palatable or unpalatable, and in that sense our future is subject to the tricks and accidents of the way questions are posed and the way alternatives are offered and eliminated” (Riker 1980: 443).

Wagner’s distinction is meant to characterize positive social theorizing, but it can be helpfully employed to characterize normative social theorizing as well. East of Eden political philosophers argue that there is an ideal state we should strive toward – much of what they do is flesh out and describe the set of institutions that characterize such an ideal, and appraise (typically indict) our current social order according to the Eden they have dreamt up. Much less common are west of Babel political philosophers. For them, there is no ideal state to aim at, and thus no ideal set of institutions for them to characterize. There is only unending disagreement and conflict that must be dealt with. The political philosopher west of Babel theorizes about the institutions we can employ to ameliorate these conflicts and help us live better together. Instead of theorizing about an end state for us to reach (as the east of Eden theorist does), the west of Babel theorist spends her time thinking about different modes of resolving conflicts and adjudicating disputes.

So we have two ways of carving up the political philosophy landscape. Common is the ideal/non-ideal theory distinction. Here, ideal theorists assume that persons are in some sense better than we currently are, whereas non-ideal theorists assume that persons are precisely as we currently are. This is familiar. Less common is the distinction between those theorists who are east of Eden and those who are west of Babel. East of Eden theorists assume that there is some ideal state of affairs we should strive in pursuit of. West of Babel theorists deny this. For them, conflict and discord are perennial, and all we can do is theorize about how to best deal with such fracas.

	East of Eden	West of Babel
Ideal theory	I	II
Non-ideal theory	III	IV

Figure 1

Our two guiding distinctions create four possibilities for political theorizing, illustrated in Figure 1. The next section offers an overview of the four different quadrants, describing in more detail what each respective research program looks like, as well as highlighting representative theorists for each category. Criticisms of the first three quadrants are also raised. This opens the door for the central thesis of this paper: the future of political philosophy lies in Quadrant IV, where we are non-ideal and west of Babel.

3. Examining the Landscape

The last section highlighted two different ways of carving up the political philosophy landscape. Ideal theorists theorize about institutions assuming men as they could be; non-ideal theorists theorize about institutions assuming men as they are. Theorists east of Eden posit an ideal state we should strive in pursuit of; theorists west of Babel hold that no such state exists, that all there is to do is deal with perennial conflict and discord. These two distinctions create four possible research programs with which political philosophers can orient themselves. This section examines more closely each of the four possibilities, raising challenges to three of these possibilities along the way.

Those theorists in the first quadrant from Figure 1 are ideal theorists who are east of Eden. Because they are ideal theorists such philosophers assume, when theorizing about institutions, that persons are morally good. Because they are east of Eden these theorists also posit that there is some ideal state of affairs that we ought to strive in pursuit of. Much of their theorizing concerns what this Eden looks like – they articulate an ideally just society. And, because they are ideal theorists, when characterizing the institutions of Eden, they assume that persons are morally better than you and I actually are.

Perhaps the most prominent theorist in this tradition is John Rawls. We have already seen that Rawls is an ideal theorist in the sense that he assumes persons are morally good. In his words: “everyone is presumed to act justly and to do his part in upholding just institutions” (Rawls 1971: 8). But beyond this, Rawls also understood his project as sketching an Eden for us to strive in pursuit of. The overarching goal is to articulate something that is “realistically utopian,” that can set a “long-term goal of political endeavor” (Rawls 2001: 4; Rawls 1999: 128).

Beyond Rawls, I believe that Quadrant I – those ideal theorists who are east of Eden – characterizes the overwhelming majority of contemporary political philosophers. Much work in political philosophy is about sketching and fighting over what an Eden inhabited by morally admirable beings would look like. Quadrant I is where most professional political philosophers direct their attention.

Political philosophers in Quadrant II are ideal theorists who are west of Babel. Because they are ideal theorists they assume, in their theorizing, that persons are morally good. And because they are west of Babel such theorists also assume that there is no ideal end state to strive for; there is only conflict and discord to continually deal with. Quadrant II is probably the most underrepresented research program among contemporary political philosophers. Indeed, the project might seem trivial, for the goal is to articulate how disputes would be resolved among moral angels, and it is unclear whether moral angels *would* find themselves in conflict. But there is some existing work relevant to this research question. In an important paper, Gregory Kavka argues that we should expect “even a community of angels to suffer from a considerable degree of conflict and discord, in the absence of an authoritative procedure for settling disputes” (Kavka 1995: 6). Kavka outlines four factors that would contribute to such disputes, and argues that the need for dispute resolution among moral angels can teach us much about the nature and need for governance institutions in our actual world.

Leaving aside those thinkers in Quadrant I, Quadrant III is probably the most represented research program among contemporary political philosophers. In Quadrant III are those political philosophers who are non-ideal theorists that are also east of Eden. This means that such theorists assume that persons are as they actually are, warts and all. But even though the theorist takes a realistic look at the human condition, she still believes there is some ideal state of affairs for them to strive in pursuit of. Only now – unlike those theorists in Quadrant I – this Eden is not inhabited by morally perfect beings. Rather, it is inhabited by beings like us. Nonetheless, there is still some ideal state of affairs we are trying to get to, and our current condition can be appraised against this standard.

Much of the pre-Rawlsian social contract tradition, I think, fits into Quadrant III. For consider: social contract theorists – and here I primarily refer to Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau – typically take a more realistic stance on human nature when compared to contemporary political

philosophers, although disagreement abounds concerning what human nature actually looks like. Hobbes, for instance, thought persons left to their own devices would produce a state of nature that is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes 1688/1994: 76); Locke was more optimistic but still thought individual self-love would produce many “inconveniences” (Locke 1689/2003: 267); and Rousseau believed that commercial society would lead to a corrupt sense of *amour-propre*, where persons are driven primarily by envy (Rousseau 1755/2011). This is the non-ideal element. Beyond this, though, social contract theorists characterize an ideal state of affairs persons should exit the state of nature in pursuit of. For Hobbes this was a monarchy under the absolute sovereign; for Locke this was a republican form of government; and for Rousseau this was some kind of deliberative democracy. Here is the east of Eden element: all three thinkers give us an institutional end state to aim at.

Perhaps the best contemporary example of Quadrant III theorizing is James M. Buchanan’s and Gordon Tullock’s *The Calculus of Consent* (1962/2004).⁷ Though some interpret it as a strictly positive project, at least Buchanan understood it as normative: “*The Calculus* differed from the precursory works in one fundamental respect, namely, it embodied a justificatory argument” (Buchanan 1987/2001: 70). And interpreted as a normative project, the overarching goal of *The Calculus* looks very similar to Rawls’s social contract project – which, recall, lay east of Eden – except Rawls’s behavioral assumption is swapped out for the more realistic *homo economicus* behavioral model.⁸ In other words, Buchanan and Tullock can be read as trying to find the institutions constituting an ideal society via a hypothetical social contract (just like Rawls), but under the assumption that persons are rationally self-interested rather than strictly compliant and harboring a sense of justice. This, I think, constitutes non-ideal theorizing that is also east of Eden, though Buchanan and Tullock’s work is deep and complex and thus subject to many different interpretations. There is at least one plausible interpretation, though, in which Buchanan and Tullock lie squarely in Quadrant III.

Finally there is Quadrant IV. Because they are non-ideal theorists, Quadrant IV thinkers assume men as they are, not as they might be. And because they are west of Babel, Quadrant IV thinkers deny that there is some ideal end state for us to strive in pursuit of. There is only

⁷ Another recent and important Quadrant III work of political philosophy is Moehler (2018). For examination and criticism, see Kogelmann (2019).

⁸ For detailed comparison of the two respective projects see Kogelmann (2018).

conflict, disagreement, and discord that will last eternally; thus, all there is to do is find ways of dealing with such cacophony. This is the task of the Quadrant IV thinker.

Who, though, is in Quadrant IV? Quadrant II aside, I think Quadrant IV is the most underrepresented research program in political philosophy. There are some important exceptions to this general trend, however. Gerald Gaus's recent work is an example. Confronting the east of Eden theorist, Gaus argues that "we should refuse to follow the philosopher who promises a path to a final end of moral agreement, the ideally just society" (Gaus 2016: xix). Instead, Gaus champions the Open Society, a society "based on a moral constitution that provides the basis of a practice of responsibility and accountability among a maximally wide array of perspectives, allowing us to reap the fruits of the cooperation and competition that diversity allows" (Gaus 2016: 246). Ryan Muldoon's theory of the social contract is another example of Quadrant IV theorizing. For Muldoon – *contra* others in the social contract tradition – there is no final resting place for us to reach that the theorist can dream up. Rather, there is only a continual, dynamic process of multi-party bargaining, in which the contours of the social contract constantly change given shifting social dynamics. In his words: "There is no designated end-point – instead we have a continual process of exploration" (Muldoon 2016: 116).

Beyond those few actually working within the Quadrant IV research program, in a recent paper Fred D'Agostino tries to illustrate the contours of Quadrant IV more generally. As he understands it: "Perhaps most notably, though this point remains to be fully explicated, the new program more or less abandons the project of providing an end-state description of a justified social order, preferring, instead... to see its job as that of identifying a *method* of (i.e. tools for) thinking about the problems of political order" (D'Agostino 2018: 31). This, I think, is a reasonably accurate characterization of west of Babel, non-ideal theorizing. The philosopher does not theorize about end states, but rather methods actual persons can use to resolve their continual disputes.

So we have our four quadrants. But simply because there exist these four distinct styles of political theorizing, it does not follow that they are all viable as philosophical projects. Indeed, many of these quadrants have faced harsh criticism in political philosophy's recent *methodenstreit*. Consider first criticisms of ideal theory (i.e., theorizing that falls into either Quadrant I or Quadrant II). The most obvious concern with assuming that persons are moral

angels is that the resulting theory will have little practical importance for beings like us who are morally flawed.⁹ The reason why has to do with the general theory of the second best. The general theory of the second best tells us that the optimal set of institutions given one set of assumptions might be radically different from the optimal set of institutions given a different set of assumptions.¹⁰ As an example, though a centrally planned economy might produce desirable consequences under the assumption that persons are moral angels,¹¹ it does not follow that it would produce desirable consequences under quite different assumptions about agent motivation and behavior.

There are other concerns with ideal theorizing besides a lack of practicality. David Schmidtz and Jacob Levy argue that ideal theorizing represents a kind of conceptual mistake: the purpose of justice is to solve a problem, but employing ideal theoretic assumptions assumes away the very problem justice is meant to solve (Schmidtz 2011; Levy 2016). Colin Farrelly offers a different criticism. According to him, ideal theory is flawed because its behavioral assumptions force the theorist to adopt a “cost-blind” approach to certain problems; as an example of what this means, ideal theorists might fail to consider the costs associated with enforcing rights, because they assume that persons are the kinds of beings who would never violate rights in the first place. Considering the costs, though, could radically change the conclusions of one’s theorizing (Farrelly 2007). As a final example, Charles Mills argues that ideal theory can lead the theorist to ignore deeply important real-world injustices that would never occur in an ideal society. In Mills’ words: “we are abstracting away from realities crucial to our comprehension of the actual workings of injustice in human interactions and social institutions, and thereby guaranteeing that the ideal-as-idealized-model will never be achieved” (Mills 2005: 170). These criticisms and others should make us skeptical of any project employing ideal theoretic assumptions. By implication, we should be skeptical of all those research projects falling into Quadrants I and II.

⁹ This, of course, assumes that political philosophers are trying to offer practical, action-guiding advice. Some deny this. In the words of G.A. Cohen (2008: 268): “The question for political philosophy is not what we should do but what we should think, even when what we should think makes no practical difference.”

¹⁰ For the general theory of the second best see Lipsey and Lancaster (1956). For philosophical discussion see Wiens (2016).

¹¹ Of course, there are other problems with centrally planned economies besides their incentive-compatibility issues: namely, knowledge problems that stem from getting rid of prices, which serve a valuable epistemic function. For an overview see Boettke (2001).

There are also several criticisms of theorizing that lay east of Eden (i.e., theorizing that falls into either Quadrant I or Quadrant III). Amartya Sen, for instance, argues that what should really concern us is remedying injustice, and that articulating a perfectly just end-state to strive in pursuit of is neither necessary nor sufficient to do this (Sen 2006; Sen 2009).¹² As another criticism, Gaus examines the epistemic demands for east of Eden style theorizing; given the complex nature of human social orders, we should be deeply skeptical of our ability to articulate a genuine ideal to strive in pursuit of. In his words: “the case for deep uncertainty in our understanding of the workings of far-off social worlds is overwhelming” (Gaus 2016: 106). And finally, David Wiens has offered criticisms very similar to those found in both Sen and Gaus. Similar to Sen, Wiens has argued that “political ideals contribute nothing to our reasoning about what to do amidst nonideal circumstances” (Wiens 2015: 434). And similar to Gaus, Wiens has argued that we should lack confidence when making judgments about far-off ideals: “given the number of variables to which our feasibility assessments must be sensitive, the complexity of their interactions, and the potential for path-dependence, determining whether any particular long-range objective is feasible is beyond human cognitive capacity” (Wiens 2015: 467). Like ideal theorizing, there are significant problems with any kind of theorizing that lay east of Eden.

So here is where things stand. We have seen that there are significant problems with the research programs characterizing Quadrants I-III, given the fact that such research programs either lay east of Eden, rely on ideal theoretic assumptions, or both. This leaves us with Quadrant IV: theorizing that is non-ideal and west of Babel. Quadrant IV is not without concerns, though. (And I should say that the following criticism applies to west of Babel theorizing more generally, and thus Quadrant II as well.) One issue – and it is a significant one – concerns what there is left for the political philosopher *to do*. It is easy to see the political philosopher’s role when she orients herself east of Eden. There is an ideal state of affairs we ought to strive in pursuit of, so the political philosopher uses her intuitions and analytical tools to sketch what such an Eden looks like. But the west of Babel political philosopher denies this. There is no Eden to reach, only disagreement and conflict that needs to be addressed. How, though, does the political philosopher address such disagreement and conflict? What is her role in dispute adjudication? More specifically: in absence of articulating a guiding ideal for persons to pursue, is there a

¹² For criticism of Sen on this point see Simmons (2010).

genuinely *normative* project left for the political philosopher to engage in? The next section sketches what theorizing might look like for the Quadrant IV political philosopher.

4. The Road Less Traveled

The last section examined four different research programs for the political philosopher, grounded in two ways of carving up the political philosophy landscape. Quadrants I-III, I argued, face significant hurdles. The final quadrant – where we are non-ideal and west of Babel – looked promising. Here, the political philosopher theorizes about those institutions that help actual persons like you and me resolve our continual conflicts and disputes. Yet this underexplored research program was not without criticism. The key problem, recall, was that it remained unclear what there is left for the political philosopher to do: in absence of offering an Eden for us to strive in pursuit of, how does the political philosopher spend her time? The purpose of this section is to answer this question by offering some suggestions concerning what non-ideal west of Babel political theorizing might look like. To this end, three distinct proposals are offered. All are consistent with Quadrant IV style theorizing, and all consist of tasks distinct from sketching governing ideals that we may strive in pursuit of.

4.1 *Reconciliation.*

In the beginning pages of his final monograph, *Justice as Fairness: a Restatement*, Rawls presents four different roles or functions of political philosophy, one of which is consistent with non-ideal west of Babel theorizing. According to Rawls, one role of political philosophy is that of *reconciliation*: “political philosophy may try to calm our frustration and rage against our society and its history by showing the way in which its institutions, when properly understood from a philosophical point of view, are rational, and developed over time as they did to attain their present, rational form” (Rawls 2001: 3). A significant component of Quadrant IV political philosophy, I believe, should consist of this style of theorizing. The political philosopher can reconcile us to our current institutions and thereby change our attitudes toward them by offering compelling arguments in their defense.

Here it might be argued that pursuing reconciliation is not a normative project, and that political philosophy is supposed to fundamentally be normative. For in merely reconciling us to our current institutional order the political philosopher is not proposing anything that is action-guiding; she is not telling us how our social and political institutions ought to look, which is the primary job of the political philosopher. Though it is true that this understanding of political philosophy is not normative in the action-guiding sense (it does not tell us what it is we ought to do), it does not necessarily follow that it is not normative in a different sense. For even though this way of doing political philosophy does not give us any specific directives, it is still *justificatory*, in that it tries to justify the existence of certain institutions. Indeed, this is what reconciliation is all about. Persons might question and, moreover, resent the fact that they live under a certain set of political and economic institutions. In trying to reconcile persons to these institutions the political philosopher provides an argument in defense of them – a justificatory argument – that, if successful, justifies the existence of the institutions in question and thus ameliorates negative attitudes toward them.

So this conception of political philosophy is still normative, albeit not action-guiding. How, though, does it relate to non-ideal west of Babel theorizing specifically? The Quadrant IV political philosopher is concerned with institutions that can help resolve conflicts and disagreements among persons like you and me. Clearly, the fact that many (though not all) of us live together in peace and harmony suggests that there already are institutions in place to help us resolve our disputes, from formal political and legal institutions, to social norms and conventions, and so on and so forth. Yet many of these institutions may look puzzling to us – why does our democracy look the way it does when it could be structured differently? – and, beyond this, many of these institutions seem objectionable – aren't the Supreme Court and Electoral College deeply anti-democratic? In response to these queries the Quadrant IV political philosopher can offer justificatory arguments in defense of our current institutional order. Doing so can hopefully change the attitudes people have toward such institutions.

Let us consider an example of this. Many liberal democracies are either formally or informally run by partisan political parties. Just as common as political parties are is skepticism toward them – indeed, at least in United States politics, the term “partisan” has been debased to a kind of epithet. Yet many political scientists are quick to point out that political parties are

essential to a well-functioning democracy. So we have an institution that helps us live together coupled with skepticism toward it. Here, the political philosopher can offer a justificatory argument in defense of partisan political parties to reconcile persons to their current institutional order. And indeed some have done just that. In a recent book Matteo Bonotti argues that political parties play a crucial role in easing the tension between a citizen's obligations to her fellow citizens and her personal religious and philosophical commitments. In his words: "under certain conditions participation in politics through political parties can contribute to significantly reducing the tension between conflicting obligations experienced by many citizens" (Bonotti 2017: 23). Highlighting this positive function that parties play can help reconcile persons to parties' widespread presence in liberal democracies.¹³

As another example, persons might be puzzled as to why legislatures are so big compared to other political institutions: "why does the legislative arm of the federal government have almost twenty times as many members as the other arms of government combined?" (Waldron 1999: 49). Here too is another opportunity for the political philosopher to provide some kind of reconciliation, and that is exactly what Jeremy Waldron does. Waldron traces the idea of large legislatures back to the mediaeval notion of *lex terrae* – the law of the land – a notion of law that is distinct from edicts of a prince. With the law of the land, "law is originally something held in common, something essentially *ours*, something indeed which only exists to the extent that it is embedded in and part of a shared way of life" (Waldron 1999: 56). The purpose of very large legislative assemblies is to reflect this notion: "the idea that the community for which law is made is essentially plural, and in its essence incapable of representation by a single voice, was second nature to our feudal predecessors – as it is, I think, to us" (Waldron 1999: 60). As before, providing this kind of justificatory argument in defense of a peculiar institution can help reconcile persons to the presence of this institution in their social and political order. This is one thing west of Babel non-ideal political philosophers can do.

4.2 *Piecemeal.*

¹³ See also White and Ypi (2016).

Reconciliation is an important and genuinely normative project for the non-ideal west of Babel political philosopher to engage in. But it cannot be the whole of Quadrant IV theorizing. For if this were so then political philosophy would be deeply conservative: all there would be for political philosophy to do would be justify what already is, not talk about what could be. So Quadrant IV will need to consist of an action-guiding component as well, beyond its reconciliatory function. But herein lies the danger: for east of Eden theorizing is of course action-guiding, yet, as we saw, both Gaus and Wiens tell us that we should be skeptical of our ability to know what far-off social worlds look like. Given these limitations of our knowledge, must the political philosopher give up on action-guiding theorizing all together?

I do not think so. Indeed, consider the words of F.A. Hayek, who also took very seriously the limits of human knowledge: “reason may, although with caution and humility, and in a piecemeal way, be directed to the examination, criticism and rejection of traditional institutions and moral principles” (Hayek 1988: 8). More specifically, the *piecemeal approach* to social reform says that instead of trying to rewrite our social orders from scratch, we examine and replace particular institutions one at a time, to see what kinds of effects such small refinements have on our overall social and political order. If the overall effects are desirable then the change can remain in place; yet if the overall effects are deleterious then we can revert from the revised to the original institution. In the words of Karl Popper, “the piecemeal method permits repeated experiments and continued readjustments” (Popper 1945/2013 153). This is a far cry from east of Eden theorizing, where the edicts of the philosopher “override the demands of law and custom, and of social rules generally” (Rawls 1971: 135).

Quadrant IV theorists can thus genuinely give action-guiding recommendations and avoid the worries of Gaus and Wiens so long as such proposals are piecemeal in nature. Instead of trying to construct social order *de novo* like the east of Eden political philosopher, the philosopher engaging in piecemeal theorizing offers smaller, much more modest institutional proposals that, if implemented, may help us live together in greater peace and harmony. This is how non-ideal west of Babel theorizing can be action-guiding in a way that avoids the fatal conceit of east of Eden theorizing.

There are not many examples of the piecemeal approach among contemporary political philosophers, as most work seeks to propose broad, sweeping revisions of society as a whole –

that is, most political philosophers orient themselves east of Eden. But there are some examples of more modest proposals for reform. In a recent essay, Thomas Mulligan argues that we ought to alter our system of voting in light of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump. The proposal – originally proffered by John Stuart Mill – is *plural voting*, which is “an electoral system under which all (eligible) citizens get a vote, and some of these citizens, owing to their superior education or occupation, get more than one” (Mulligan 2018: 287). The merits of the proposal aside (I personally have my doubts), this is an example of a more modest institutional reform when compared to the construction of a new social order *de novo*. As another example of a piecemeal institutional reform, ethicist Peter Jaworski has argued in defense of allowing companies to pay for plasma donations in order to meet urgent demand needs (Jaworski 2017). Again, the merits aside (though I think this is a wonderful proposal), this is an example of modest institutional reforms that avoid east of Eden’s fatal conceit. If the Quadrant IV political philosopher wants to offer action-guiding proposals, it should be of this general kind.

4.3 *Meta-Principles*.

Thus far we have highlighted two tasks for the Quadrant IV political philosopher. First, she can engage in reconciliation: she can offer justificatory arguments in defense of our current institutions that help us live together in peace and harmony. And, if she thinks that our current institutional order falls short of some normative baseline, then she can engage in an action-guiding project by proposing piecemeal reforms. Both tasks are consistent with non-ideal west of Babel theorizing, and both avoid those worries raised against the Quadrants I-III research programs in §3 above.

To end I would like to offer one final thing there is for the non-ideal west of Babel political philosopher to do. Recall from §3 above that D’Agostino offers a characterization of the Quadrant IV research program. And in doing so, D’Agostino offers what he takes to be the primary task of the Quadrant IV political philosopher. Rather than reconciliation or piecemeal reform, D’Agostino takes the primary task to be that of articulating *meta-principles*. These meta-principles are “a set of abstract principles that will have to be instantiated (though in any of a variety of ways) in order to be ‘diversity accommodative’ in a society which cannot agree about

the social ideal, but still which seeks to obtain the benefits of mutuality” (D’Agostino 2018: 34). Perhaps a bit more specifically, the political philosopher’s meta-principles “will provide design criteria for any array of concrete institutions that can claim to exemplify the open society” (D’Agostino 2018: 34). The general idea here is that, instead of articulating particular institutions for societies to adopt to adjudicate their disputes, the political philosopher can articulate meta-principles that characterize features all successful institutions that allow us to live together share in common. D’Agostino offers some instructive examples of such meta-principles: that normative injunctions take the form of prohibitions rather than permissions, that some system of jurisdictional rights is employed,¹⁴ that market exchange be the primary mode of social coordination, and so on and so forth (D’Agostino 2018: 34).

A couple things to note about the meta-principles approach to political theorizing before looking at specific examples. First, the meta-principles approach does not fall into the east of Eden theorist’s fatal conceit because it does not offer specific proposals to remake society *de novo*. Rather, the meta-principles approach says: if you want to pursue some kind of reform effort, here are some general guidelines that you ought to follow. Indeed, one of the causes of east of Eden’s fatal conceit is that it ignores specific conditions of particular societies and thus the important local knowledge required for institutional design – there is one Eden, for all of us to pursue, regardless our particular circumstances. The meta-principles approach does not make this mistake, however. This is because it offers general guidelines – *that can be coupled with local knowledge and conditions* – for pursuing institutional reform. The meta-principles, when used as guidelines in one society, may result in very different institutional proposals when used as guidelines in a quite different society. This ability to adapt to local conditions suggests that it takes seriously the knowledge limitations that Gaus and Wiens are concerned with and thereby does not fall into the east of Eden theorist’s fatal conceit.

Second, it might be wondered whether articulating meta-principles is a normative project. Now as we saw in §4.1 above, political philosophy need not be action-guiding in order for it to be normative – the project of reconciliation counts as a normative project even though it does not tell us what it is we ought to do. While certainly true, articulating meta-principles *is* genuinely action-guiding, though in a different way from the piecemeal reform approach. The piecemeal

¹⁴ For more on jurisdictional rights and dispute resolution, see Chung and Kogelmann (forthcoming).

reform approach says: implement rule r and see what happens; if the consequences are bad revert back, if they are good then keep r in place. Rather than prescribing specific rules, the meta-principles approach says that a certain subset of rules is *permissible* to implement, and that further considerations (like knowledge of local conditions) is needed to pick a specific rule from the relevant subset. To be a bit more precise, let the set of all logically possible rules be R . Let set of rules R' be the set of all rules adhering to the political philosopher's meta-principles. Clearly, R' will be a subset on R and will also likely not be a singleton. The meta-principles approach says that any rule in set R' is permissible to implement, but in terms of *which* rule in R' should be implemented it does not say. More information is required to make such a choice, and perhaps this is a job for piecemeal theorizing down the road. Nonetheless, in highlighting the set of rules R' as permissible to implement the meta-principles approach is offering us *some* important guidance. So though it is not action-guiding in the sense of the piecemeal approach (here, a specific rule is recommended), it is still action-guiding in a broader sense.

Are there any examples of the meta-principles approach in contemporary political philosophy? I cannot think of any, which means there is low-hanging fruit to be picked. There are examples of this kind of theorizing in the social sciences, however. Here, Elinor Ostrom's work in *Governing the Commons* comes to mind. In this book Ostrom explores how it is actual communities solve common pool resource problems which, at the time, most economists thought were unsolvable without some kind of exogenous government acting as a *deus ex machina*. After observing several communities able to preserve their commons without such an exogenous device, Ostrom articulates seven "design principles" that all such communities share in common. Roughly, these are meta-principles of the kind D'Agostino discusses. Included among these design principles are: clearly defined boundaries to the common pool resource, monitoring of appropriation from the commons, graduated sanctions for violation of the rules, conflict-resolution mechanisms, and so on and so forth (Ostrom 1990: 90). Though she was a positive social scientist of the highest order, these design principles have clear normative value. For those communities faced with common pool resource dilemmas, such principles can act as rough guidelines in the development of their own particular institutions to resolve their own particular problems. The Quadrant IV political philosopher can do much the same as Ostrom did, highlighting the broad and vague principles that characterize the sorts of institutions that allow us to live better together.

5. Conclusion

Political philosophy is stuck in a rut. The overwhelming majority of political philosophers spend their time dreaming up utopian societies inhabited by morally perfect beings. Not only is this project useless, it might actually be dangerous – the political philosopher does not know enough to construct a social order from scratch, nor would a society constructed for morally perfect beings be appropriate for persons like you and me. To avoid these pitfalls the political philosopher can adopt a quite different research agenda. Instead of assuming men as they could be, she can instead assume men as they are. And instead of articulating a perfect end state for us to strive in pursuit of, she can think about actual institutions we can use to resolve the conflicts and disagreements that are an eternal feature of the human condition. This, I think, is the future of political philosophy: where we are non-ideal and west of Babel.

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