

Justice in Theory and Practice:
Debates about Agency, Utopianism, and Political Action

§1 Practicalism and Utopianism

Vibrant debates about the method and aims of political philosophy have emerged over the last two decades, accelerating with the death of John Rawls. These debates are multi-faceted and far reaching, touching on the structure of the theory of justice, the respective roles of ideal and nonideal theory, and the appropriate relationship of the theory of justice to practice.¹ Here I provide an overview of these debates seen from the perspective of the relationship of theory to practice, highlighting the work of authors who draw conclusions about the method and aims of political philosophy on the basis of views about the appropriate relation of the theory of justice to action. Given Rawls' centrality to the discipline, much of the debate has adjudicated the merits of his approach and, where the appraisal is critical, provided ostensibly superior alternatives. Although mention of Rawls is unavoidable in this context, as far as possible, I abstain from engaging with the literature about his work, keeping the focus on the substance of prominent contemporary views about the relationship of theory to practice in political philosophy.²

This debate can be usefully organized using two oppositions that together carve the field into three broad families of views. Call "practicalism" the view that the theory of justice exists to guide political action. Call "utopianism" the view that reflection on a just society plays an important role in the theory of justice. On the one hand, we might divide the literature between practicalists and anti-practicalists. On the other hand, we might divide the literature between utopians and anti-utopians. Among the practicalists we find two groups: utopians who argue that there is an important role for reflection on a just society in guiding practice, and anti-utopians who deny it. Anti-practicalists take what they view as an uncompromising approach to normativity and so insist on the legitimacy of unrealistic utopian theorizing. All anti-practicalists in this debate are also utopians. By contrast, all anti-utopians in this debate are also practicalists since they view reflection on a just society as irrelevant for practice. We can thus identify three broad families of views: utopian practicalists, anti-practicalists, and anti-utopians.

John Rawls is the most prominent utopian practicalist. He is the lightning rod for critique from both anti-practicalists and anti-utopians. Rawls divided the theory of justice into two parts:

¹ For an excellent if slightly dated overview of this debate viewed from the perspective of the relationship of ideal to nonideal theory, see Valentini 2012.

² I also do not discuss the rich literature on realism in political philosophy that might (or might not) be viewed as calling into questions the presuppositions of this debate, depending on whether justice can be construed as a "political" value in the realist's special sense. For an overview of realist literature, see Rossi and Sleat 2014. For a practicalist response see Simon Hope 2020.

ideal and nonideal theory (Rawls 1991, 7-8).³ Ideal theory involves an articulation and defense of the principles of justice that adjudicate the claims that citizens have on one another to order their shared institutions and practices (Rawls 1991, 5, 115-117). When these principles are satisfied, the valid claims of the members of society on one another vis-à-vis their institutions and practices are met. Rawls thinks of these principles, along with their ordering relations, as specifying the idea of a just society capable of serving as the long-range goal of our political hope and action (Rawls 1991, 219, 245-246; Rawls 2001, 4-5, 11-13; Rawls 1993, 89-90). As a goal for political action rather than mere wish or fantasy, the idea of a just society must be realistic, compatible with the facts about human beings and our social relations, including our characteristic foibles and epistemic limitations, and the historical conditions of our societies (Rawls 2001, 11-16). For Rawls, realism and utopianism are two sides of the same coin, united in the idea of a just society conceived as a practical good to be pursued in action (Laurence 2021, 35).

Nonideal theory for Rawls begins in our decidedly non-utopian present, confronting the pressing and urgent injustices that surround us with a view to changing our society so that we may approach justice (Rawls 1993, 89-90). It considers pathways towards a just society that are morally permissible, political possible, and likely to be effective. Nonideal theory, as Rawls conceives it, is therefore transitional or dynamic in character insofar as it involves reasoning about how to move from a condition of injustice towards one of justice (Simmons 2010). Although ideal theory is utopian our interest in it is practical, since we engage in ideal theory to shed systematic light on the pressing injustices discussed by nonideal theory for the sake of action in the present (Rawls 1971, 7-8, 351, 453-454).

Leaving aside the details of Rawls' own views, the broad contours of utopian practicalism are attractive. It promises to integrate two tendencies of political philosophy that might seem to pull in opposite directions. The first is a critical engagement with the utopian impulse in the form of robust normative reflection on the principles of justice. The second is the orientation to political action. Utopian practicalism would be good if we could have it, but many doubt whether the reconciliation of the two tendencies it offers is coherent or justified.

§2 Anti-Practicalism

G.A. Cohen is perhaps the most influential anti-practicalist critic of Rawls. Over his storied career, Cohen vigorously resisted attempts to downgrade or temper claims of justice by appeal to facts that condition the possibility of its realization.⁴ His view is that such arguments unacceptably compromise an account of justice when raised to the status of first principle. For example, in his famous critique of Rawls' justification of unequal pay as a necessary incentive to motivate the talented to productivity, Cohen argued that the need to cater to the selfish dispositions of the talented shows the resulting inequality to be unjust (Cohen 2008, 27-87;

³ Several authors helpfully discuss different roles or conceptions of ideal and nonideal theory that operate in Rawls. For the purposes I focus on the "navigational" or "teleological" conception of ideal and nonideal theory. See Valentini 2012, Stemplowska and Swift 2012, and Laurence 2017..

⁴ See Cohen (2001), Cohen (2008), and Cohen (2011).

Cohen 2011, 117-134). While it may be necessary, and so good policy, to cater to their selfish dispositions, we should not pretend this makes the resulting inequality just.⁵

In his late work Cohen generalizes this pattern of argument into a robust anti-practicalism by arguing that no facts condition fundamental principles of justice (Cohen 2003; Cohen 2008, 229-273). Any time a fact grounds a normative principle, there is a further principle that explains why the fact grounds the principle. If we follow this chain to its ultimate source, we arrive at fundamental principles that do not depend on any facts. Often, where a principle seems to be grounded in the nature of the beings falling under the principle, Cohen argues that this is explained by a fact free hypothetical principle. For example, if the fact that enslaving human beings is wrong is grounded in the fact that humans are self-conscious, then this will be explained by a principle that says that if some being is self-conscious, you ought not to enslave it (Cohen, 2003, 225-226).⁶ Relatedly, Cohen rejects the feasibility requirement on principles of justice (Cohen 2008, 250-254). Where facts about feasibility seem to exclude some principle, we should ask whether we ought to fulfill the principle were it is possible to do so. If the answer is yes, then the principle stands.

For this reason, Cohen holds that principles of justice do not exist to guide practice (Cohen 2008, 267). Instead, such principles should be viewed as articulating the truth about the nature of justice. When fundamental principles of justice are combined with empirical facts about society and human nature, as well as judgments about other values, such fundamental principles do justify “rules of regulation” that serve to guide practice. But such rules of regulation, beholden to the facts as they are and incorporating judgments about other values, differ in content from the principles of justice that serve to partially justify them.

In keeping with this analysis, Cohen argues that the question political philosophy addresses is “not what to do but what to think, even when what we think makes no difference to practice” (Cohen 2008, 268).⁷ As the contrast between thought and action shows, the kind of thought Cohen envisions answering this question is theoretical rather than practical. Swift 2008 follows Cohen by arguing that the primary aim of political philosophy is epistemological rather than practical, construing these as contrasting interests. Both authors draw analogies between political philosophy and contemplative disciplines such as arithmetic, astronomy, and archaeology, pointing out that inquiries into the truth in these domains, although they touch on action in various ways, do not exist to guide action and are valuable as intellectual inquiries apart from such practical interests (Cohen 2008, 267; Swift 2008, 368).⁸

Several authors have pointed out that Cohen’s understanding of fundamental principles of justice stands in tension with the practical and second-personal form of claims of justice (Gheaus 2013, 447-448; Anderson 2010a; Laurence 2021). Where there is injustice, some are

⁵ For a reply, see Joshua Cohen (2001).

⁶ For insightful criticism of the appeal to fact free hypothetical principles see Miller 2013, 23-24.

⁷ For related arguments see also Swift 2008 and Mason 2005.

⁸ Estlund 2011b points out that it is not enough to secure hopeless utopian theory’s value that it consists of truths, since the phonebook does as well. He argues that hopeless theory value is in helping us to dispense with false consolations and appreciating with moral honesty how far we are from true justice. David Miller calls this a politics of lamentation, which he associates with St. Augustine’s discussion of the two cities (Miller 2013, 228-249).

wronged. The ones wronged have a grievance consisting of unfulfilled valid claims on others.⁹ They have standing to hold those who wrong them to account for this failure. Cohen's understanding of principles carry justice far outside this framework. No agent can be responsible for doing the impossible, and none has a grievance when others fail to do what they are manifestly unable to do. Furthermore, ordinary judgments of justice are practical in ways that diverge sharply from the contemplative disciplines to which Cohen and Swift compare political philosophy. Judgments that attribute injustice, unlike judgments of arithmetic, practically implicate the judge by raising the question of how they are related to the doing and suffering of this injustice. This answer reaches out towards ongoing struggle against injustice, raising the practical question for the judge, "Which side are you on?" (Laurence 2021, 56-63). Some argue as well that the apparent radicalism of anti-practicalism is a false consolation for political despair since it is purchased at the steep price of downgrading the practical significance of justice (Miller 2013, 228-249).

David Estlund has developed a more tempered and nuanced anti-practicalism that evades some of these objections (Estlund 2011a; Estlund 2014; Estlund 2019). Unlike Cohen, he grants for the sake of argument that principles of justice may depend on facts and be subject to a feasibility requirement (Estlund 2011a, 210-211; Estlund 2019, 19-20). But Estlund points out that even where people are perfectly capable of fulfilling a principle, they may be unwilling to do so owing to unjust dispositions, for example, selfishness or racial bias. To bend the principles of justice to accommodate such unjust dispositions is perverse (Estlund 2011a, 219-221; Estlund 2019, 124-148). If cynics happened to be right about humanity, such dispositions might be widespread and abiding enough that any attempt to build and comply with just institutions is sure to fail, perhaps with disastrous consequences. Estlund thus defends the legitimacy of "hopeless" theories of justice that resolutely specify what is just without recommending that we hopelessly pursue justice in practice (Estlund 2014, 120-123; Estlund 2019). Although he does not defend a hopeless theory, he argues that hopelessness is not a mark against a theory of justice. Given the possibility that the cynic might be right, he challenges practicalists to explain what would then be wrong with a hopeless theory of justice.¹⁰

§3 Anti-Utopianism

Many anti-utopians also motivate their approach in part through a critique of the Rawlsian paradigm. Whereas the anti-practicalists criticize the Rawlsian paradigm as too practical, the anti-utopians criticize it for not being practical enough. From their point of view, the preoccupation with the idea of a just society hinders political philosophy from providing appropriate guidance for the struggle with injustice. They argue that Rawls' pre-occupation with

⁹ For the second-personal conception of justice, see Fienberg (1970), Thompson (2004), and Darwall (2013).

¹⁰ This gauntlet is taken up Laurence (2021, 166-195) who defends a default attitude of practical hope and argues that hopeless theories, although perhaps coherent, nonetheless are defective as theories of justice for failing to live up to the practical aspirations of political philosophy.

the idea of a just society is misleading, perhaps even ideological, and that it fails to engage with the primary issues relevant to agents facing injustice.¹¹

Amartya Sen defends one influential variety of anti-utopianism that we might call “comparativism”. Sen 2006 argues that what we want from a theory of justice is practical guidance in reducing inequities and righting troubling injustices. For these purposes we do not need the grand partition between justice and injustice provided by the division between ideal and nonideal theory (Sen 2006, 216-218). Just as we do not need to know what the tallest mountain is to compare the height of any two given peaks, so we do not need to know about a just society to decide towards which feasible future we should move (Sen 2006, 221-224). Such knowledge is neither necessary nor even useful for making comparative judgments about the justice of the possibilities open to us. What we need instead is a framework of impartial reasoning that provides pairwise comparisons between the justice of feasible outcomes. Using a social choice-theoretic framework in combination with an impartial spectator theory, Sen 2009 aspires to provide such a framework.

Robeyns 2008 and Simmons 2010 have responded to Sen’s provocations by arguing that a better analogy for the pursuit of justice than judging comparative height would be navigation to a destination. If we are headed to the tallest mountain, then we need to know the identity and location of this mountain; information about the comparative height of different nearby peaks is obviously insufficient, since it is possible that none of these peaks is the destination we’re trying to reach. Given that this is how utopian practicalists are conceiving the concept of justice, Sen’s argument is radically incomplete.

Wiens 2015 and Gaus 2016 both defend comparativism from this charge by developing formal frameworks intended to model the conditions that need to be met for justice to play an ineliminable navigational role. On Wiens’ model, to determine whether a just society is the proper target of our political hope and action, we must first determine whether it is the optimal feasible state of affairs (Wiens 2015, 440-442). However, Wiens argues we should pursue the optimal feasible state of affairs whether it’s a just society or not. The navigational role for a just society is irrelevant once we understand that it can only be vindicated by comparative judgements that deliver all the information we need for action. Gaus, by contrast, rejects feasibility as the relevant space of comparison owing to its instability and failure to satisfy various formal properties (Gaus 2016, 57-61). Instead he develops a model employing two variables: institutional resemblance to a just society and a “justice score”. Using this framework, he argues that a just society only plays an irreducible navigational role in a very special range of cases where the justice score diverges from institutional resemblance score at points, and where the just society resembles our own sufficiently that it is in our epistemic “neighborhood” (Gaus 2016, 61-89).¹²

While these models are certainly interesting, other objections to comparativism abound, some of which also apply to these formal frameworks. Several authors argue that the principles of justice are relevant for comparisons, by specifying the proper understanding of values that

¹¹ Anderson (2010); Mills (2005).

¹² For criticism of some aspects of Gaus’ formal framework, see Laurence 2021, 131-135 & 143-166.

are relevant to comparative judgments.¹³ Others add that the ordering principles characterized are to some limited extent relevant to making comparisons in nonideal theory.¹⁴ David Estlund argues that many of our ordinary judgments about justice are non-comparative, e.g. that slavery is unjust (Estlund 2016). Others presuppose non-comparative judgments in the form of a partition between justice and injustice. For example, judgments about the severity of injustice (e.g. that slavery is profoundly unjust) presuppose that we can judge the extent of normative departures from a threshold of justice. Mere comparative judgments, whether ordinal or scalar, will not deliver this information (Estlund 2016, 15-16). Other authors emphasize that such thought about the severity of injustice is crucial for thinking about the justified response to injustice, including the duties we are under to rectify injustice, the policies that can be justified to address it, and the permissions that we have to engage in self-protection or resistance in ways that otherwise wouldn't be justified absent severe injustice (Laurence 2021, 76-84).

Besides comparativism, some anti-utopian practicalists adopt what David Wiens calls "a systems failure framework" (Wiens 2012; Wiens 2015).¹⁵ Instead of conceiving of political philosophy as steering us *towards* justice as an ideal condition, systems failure analysis views political philosophy as steering us *away* from systemic failures (Wiens 2015, 471-472). Elizabeth Anderson is an influential proponent of this approach. She argues that the starting point of political philosophy is the perception of a political problem—an injustice—that jars us out of our complacency (Anderson 2010b, 3). We come to political philosophy like a sick patient comes to a doctor, with a sense that all is not well with our political community. This sense is based in a set of symptoms that present a *prima facie* case that injustice exists. The political philosopher synthesizes normative judgments and empirical analysis to diagnose the underlying social pathology that gives rise to the symptoms. Drawing on an empirical theory of the reproduction of the injustice, the political philosopher then proposes courses of treatment, targeted interventions designed to disrupt the pathology and overcome the systemic failure (Anderson 2010b, 3-7, 22).

Different systems failure theorists relate political ideals to this process in different ways. Wiens dispense with ideals as targets towards which we move altogether (Wiens 2015, 440-442). Anderson, by contrast, identifies political ideals with the proposed remedies for social pathologies (Anderson 2010b, 6-7). She represents ideals as tested in experience, as we would test courses of treatment for some pathology. Ideals succeed when they successfully address people's legitimate grievances without giving rise to a new set of grievances (new systemic failures). Anderson's work, in addition to an unusually rich synthesis of empirical theory, thus often draws on extended historical examples intended to illustrate the testing of ideals in experience.¹⁶

¹³ Swift 2008, 372-378; Gilabert 2012, 45-46; Valentini 2011, 306-309.

¹⁴ Valentini 2011, 308.

¹⁵ Note that systems failure framework is compatible with comparativism. Wiens embraces both. Other authors, such as Anderson 2010b, opt for a systems failure approach without advancing a general comparativism.

¹⁶ Anderson 2010b characterizes the postbellum United States as implementing an ideal of civil equality for blacks without political or social equality. She holds that experience showed this solution to be inadequate, since it left many grievances of black Americans unaddressed.

The systems failure approach can be criticized in a variety of ways. Ben Laurence argues that the observations about the starting points of inquiry Anderson uses to motivate a systems theory approach fail, since these starting points are compatible with a view on which a developed theory of justice grounds nonideal theory in the representation of a just society (Laurence 2021, 49-101). Arguably, the approach is unsatisfyingly piecemeal, leaving the normative basis of the identification of injustice and judgments about its severity unanalyzed and presupposed. Tommie Shelby has produced the most trenchant critique to date of the medical model as it pertains to racial injustice (Shelby 2014; Shelby 2016, 2-4). By focusing narrowly on a given problem and feasible remedies to it, the medical model operates with a blind-spot to systemic injustices that often form of the background of more localized political pathologies. He argues that systemic injustices have consequences for our reasoning about what forms of government policy can be justified to the disadvantaged as “treatments” for the social pathologies that affect them, as well as what forms of countermeasures they are permitted or required to take.

§4 Utopian Practicalism

From this overview, we can see the challenges faced by utopian practicalists. To respond to the anti-practicalists, they must explain how and why political philosophy aims at action. To respond to the anti-utopians, they also must explain why the idea of a just society has practical relevance to agents of change in the struggle against injustice. Although Rawls is an obvious source of inspiration, Rawls spoke surprisingly little about nonideal theory, especially in a domestic context. Furthermore, some utopian practicalists argue what work of his exists in nonideal theory is marred by indefensible views about the role of agency and change (Valentini 2009, 347-353; Laurence 2020; Laurence 2021, 102-142). The utopian practicalists must also find a way to go beyond Rawls. A final pressing issue for utopian practicalism is the integration of normative reflection on principles of justice with the empirical material necessary for thinking about the practical response to injustice. Whatever objections face systems failure theorists, they rightly highlight the fact that empirically informed analysis of real injustice is crucial for nonideal theory. Utopian practicalists thus need a way to embed such an analysis in a dynamic framework oriented to the pursuit of a just society.

Much of the contribution to the development of utopian practicalist positions is to be found in the analysis of definite axes of injustice. As a philosophically informed social scientist concerned with the injustices of capitalism, Erik Olin Wright’s contribution has been especially far-reaching, especially regarding the question how to embed empirical analysis in a dynamic framework oriented to justice. Wright argues that principles of justice are necessary both for the diagnosis of the injustices of capitalism and as a compass to orient our intentional social transformations (Wright, 2010, 11-20 & 110-149; Wright, 2019, 9-37). Approaching the terrain of nonideal theory from the perspective of a social scientist, Wright calls the enterprise that brings together normative reflection on justice with a synthesis of social science “emancipatory

Anderson 2017 characterizes the ideal of the free market as a solution to systemic failures of feudalism. While addressing many grievances under feudalism, it failed the test of experience by giving rise to new sets of grievances for industrial workers.

social science” (Wright 2010, 10-33). Emancipatory social science is produced with a view to aiding agents of transformation in their intentional efforts to overcome injustice. As Wright conceives it, emancipatory social science is concerned with providing: (1) an account of the social reproduction of unjust status quos, (2) an account of the contradictions of that process, which represent opportunities for transforming the system, (3) identification of viable alternatives to unjust status quos that better realize the principles of justice, (4) identification of possible agents of transformation, and (5) strategies of social transformation through which such agents might move from the unjust status quo towards viable alternatives that are accessible from our present position (Wright 2010, 273-307).¹⁷ His contributions include an important distinction between ruptural, interstitial, and symbiotic strategies of transformation, along with useful typologies of anti-capitalist politics (Wright 2010, 308-365; Wright 2019, 37-64). In response to the epistemic difficulties in identifying viable just arrangements stressed by many anti-utopians, Wright also pioneered the method of studying what he calls “real utopias”, small or localized experiments that if generalized might amount to viable alternatives to aspects of capitalism’s unjust status quos (Wright 2010, 150-272). The successes, limitations, and failures of these real utopias provide some guidance for thinking about the challenges involved in “scaling them up”.

Tommie Shelby’s contribution comes in the context of his analysis of racial injustice in the United States. In an important debate with Charles Mills, Shelby defends the relevance of liberal theory and the principles of justice to the identification of racial injustice and the pursuit of racial justice (Shelby 2004).¹⁸ In *We Who Are Dark*, Shelby begins to develop his distinctive synthesis of liberalism with the tradition of black radicalism (Shelby 2009). Drawing on the rich history of Black Nationalism, Shelby considers the prospects for black solidarity. While acknowledging the complications for black political agency of increasing class division among African Americans, he argues that shared interests and moral imperatives exist sufficient to enable a politics of solidarity that could unite black agency in opposition to injustice (Shelby 2009, 136-160, 243-258).

In *Dark Ghettos*, Shelby narrows his focus to one side of the class equation, considering questions of justice that arise around the plight of poor blacks dwelling in segregated neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage (Shelby, 2016). In this context, he develops what he calls a “political ethics of the oppressed” exploring what permissions and requirements of justice the oppressed face given their severely disadvantaged position in an unjust system (Shelby 2016, 5-9). Shelby argues that the political agency of poor blacks in high-poverty neighborhoods must be taken seriously, and that many of the so-called “pathological” behaviors that are identified as causes of concentrated disadvantage by social scientists can be viewed as justified political responses to systemic injustice. The political ethics of the oppressed has momentous consequences for the limits of permissible forms of policy interventions proposed by social scientists and executed by government actors or concerned philanthropists, especially when these agents unjustly advantaged by, or bear responsibility for sustaining, the status quo

¹⁷ For another useful discussion of general theories of social change as these relate to nonideal theory, see Hendrix 2013.

¹⁸ For Charles Mills’ reply, see Mills 2013. For Shelby’s rejoinder to Mills’ reply, see Shelby 2013.

that afflicts disadvantaged black residents of segregated neighborhoods.¹⁹ Shelby argues that rather than passive recipients of needed policy interventions, the “ghetto poor” are better viewed as potential agents of change in the political project of “ghetto abolitionism” (Shelby 2016, 275-284). In short, if Wright approaches the theory of justice from the side of an emancipatory vision of social science, Shelby brings the theory of justice to social science in the hope that it might, by taking justice and the political agency of the oppressed seriously, become emancipatory.

Important contributions to utopian practicalism have also been made in the context of work on global justice and human rights. In the context of her work on global justice, Ypi develops the concept of “activist political theory” that is concerned not only with interpreting the world but also changing it (Ypi 2012, 35-70). In activist political theory, the theorist is both an observer and a political actor who uses a “dialectical approach” to integrate ideal and nonideal theory taking her theoretical cues from ongoing struggles (Ypi 2012, 40-60). This dialectical approach involves making contacts with existing categories of understanding, but it also involves a leading role for what Ypi calls “avant-garde political agents” who are on the cutting edge of potentially transformative tendencies (Ypi 2012, 61-67). The activist political theorist works to examine the claims of avant-garde political agents and to create a theory, including principles of justice, to articulate and strengthen their emerging practice with a view to changing the world. Among philosophers working on agency and change, she is perhaps the one to take most seriously the thought that the emancipatory struggles of agents of change set the agenda for, and contribute vitally to, the philosopher’s analysis of justice.

Pablo Gilibert, in collaboration with Holly Lawford-Smith, has done the most to discuss the issue of feasibility and its relation to a political philosophy oriented towards the end of a just society. Gilibert and Lawford-Smith 2012 defend a conditional analysis of feasibility. They present an account of different and increasingly demanding feasibility constraints appropriate at three stages of analysis: the selection of normative principles, the institutionalization of these principles, and concrete political reforms (Gilibert and Lawford-Smith 2012, 818-823). Gilibert has also articulated the concept of dynamic duties—duties to change the context of action to make something feasible in the future that is not at present—and the associated concept of dynamic powers (Gilibert 2017). In the context of his philosophy of human rights, he has also developed a concept of solidaristic empowerment, which involves meeting the claims of wronged agents in such a way as to simultaneously build their capacity to effectuate social transformations as agents of change (Gilibert, 2019, 161-190). He has deployed this structure to provide illuminating, dynamically structured accounts of human rights, exploring their relation to feasibility, solidaristic empowerment, and broader principles of global and socialist

¹⁹ Take one illustrative example, consider Shelby’s evaluation of the legitimacy of the current regime of workfare that targets black joblessness by incentivizing (coercing) poor blacks to work at exploitative low-wage jobs. Shelby connects this question to ideal theory by first considering different rationales for a duty to work. He argues that systemic injustice, exploitation, and expressive harms of grinding low-wage work undermine all such rationales in the case of the “ghetto poor”. In light of this, any policy by state actors to incentivize work by withholding needed aid without simultaneously making good work available cannot be justified. (Shelby 2016, 193-200).

justice.²⁰ In sum, Gilabert contributes a sophisticated body of thought intended to render the utopian impulse practical by guiding us between the Scylla of cynical realism and the Charybdis of impotent realism (Gilabert 2012, 50).²¹

Perhaps the most systematic attempt to defend utopian practicalism in general terms is Laurence 2021. Laurence defends what he calls “the teleological conception” of the theory of justice, which relates the struggle of agents of change to the end (telos) of a just society (Laurence 2021, 31-36, 56-101). In response to anti-practicalists, he argues that political philosophy is practical in its starting points, in the concepts that organize it, and in the relationship of the political philosopher to agents of change (Laurence 2021, 196-205). In response to anti-utopians, he argues that the end of a just society guides the response to injustice both dynamically as something to be pursued, and immanently as something that already has an imperfect reality in practice (Laurence 2021, 71-101). Laurence argues that the relationship of theory to practice, and so of the philosopher to potential agents of change, is a central topic for the theory of justice (Laurence 2021, 102-142).

The debates canvassed here between these three loose families of views about the relationship of theory to practice in political philosophy are ongoing. It is a live question which research paradigm will bear the heaviest and ripest fruit. Whether that fruit is action or contemplation is itself one subject of the debate.

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²⁰ For a discussion of feasibility in the context of socio-economic rights, see Gilabert 2009 and for feasibility in the context of socialism, see Gilabert 2011. For a general overview of the feasibility literature beyond the contributions of Lawford-Smith and Gilabert, see the helpful discussion in Chahboun 2017.

²¹ Other important utopian practicalist contributions to our thought about global justice and human rights that I do not have the space to discuss include Wenar 2015 and Nussbaum 2007.

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