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What Good Is It? Unrealistic Political Theory and the Value of Intellectual Work*

Abstract: Suppose justice depends on some very unlikely good behavior. In that case the true (or correct, or best) theory of justice might have no practical value. But then, what good would it be? I consider analogies with science and mathematics in order to test various ways of tying their the value of intellectual work to practice, though I argue that these fail. If their value, or that of some political theory, is not practical then what is good about them? As for political theory, I consider the question of what would even count as an answer to this question, and I conclude with the tentative proposal that it is valuable to come to understand something that is, itself, important.

“I have never done anything ‘useful’. No discovery of mine has made, or is likely to make, directly or indirectly, for good or ill, the least difference to the amenity of the world. [...] Judged by all practical standards, the value of my mathematical life is nil; and outside mathematics it is trivial anyhow. I have just one chance of escaping a verdict of complete triviality, that I may be judged to have created something worth creating.”
(G. H. Hardy, *A Mathematician’s Apology*, 1940)

“Honk If You Believe Reimann’s Hypothesis”
(Bumper sticker, Seekonk, Massachusetts, 2010)

1. Introduction

There is a deep kind of practicalism (as I will call it) prevalent in the field of political theory. Not everyone subscribes to it, and few reflect on it or defend it in print, but many political theorists seem to believe that the value of political theory, when it has any, must ultimately be practical. They might hold all intellectual work to this same standard, or they might think it is a special constraint

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on valuable *political* theory or philosophy (I will use the terms interchangeably). I will argue against practicalism in political theory. I will, however, also formulate and consider a challenge for the non-practicalist about political theory. So, whatever your view, I will be considering a serious challenge to it. I will begin with the idea of what is ‘practical’ in a general and vague way, and then move toward a relatively clear characterization of the practicalist position that I wish to criticize.

It would be awkward, but not devastating to the practicalist if it had to be granted that the true or correct theory of justice has no practical value given how people will actually behave. Many will doubt that this is even a coherent possibility, so I will begin by arguing that it is a real possibility. That only sets up my main question, since there would still be a large opening for the practicalist. Suppose the true (or correct, or best) theory of justice has no practical value. *What good would it be?* Many think that it would be no good at all—that the theory would be valueless (more or less), and the theorist’s work a waste of time or worse. My aim is to resist that view. It is a kind of skepticism about non-practical value—at least for normative political theory. I will use a theory of justice as a convenient example, but the issues apply more broadly.

I begin by arguing that an impractical theory of justice might yet be true. Next, I pursue my instinct that if it is, indeed, the truth about justice it could hardly be without value or importance. By assumption, though, its value or importance must not be practical. In that case, practicalism must be a mistake.

Even if this puts the practicalist skeptic in an awkward position, it is hardly satisfying philosophically. Practicalism, as I’ve said, has the odd implication that even the true theory of justice—since it might be impractical—might be valueless. However, without some understanding of the kind of non-practical value an impractical theory of justice is supposed to have, a practicalist could be forgiven for biting that bullet. A further aim of this paper is to say more about non-practical value in general, and about the case of political theory in particular. I won’t claim to have refuted practicalism, but I do hope to provide some rational reflection that should weaken its hold on those who are initially drawn to it.

The value of (at least some) practical political theory is not in question here. Practicalism, however, claims much more than that. It claims that *only* practical political theory has value. It is the more skeptical of the two positions in play, the other being the view that both practical and impractical political theory can have significant value. I am not defending impractical against practical theory, which would be silly. I am arguing against practicalism, the view that only practical normative political theory has value.

Some normative theory might be impractical because its recommendations are not within the abilities of those who are supposedly subject to them. I leave those cases aside, and assume for simplicity that there are not requirements of justice on a society if it is not within the society’s ability to meet them. It wouldn’t follow, of course, that the meeting of requirements must be at all likely, or that they must hew to motivations and behavior patterns that are typical or characteristic of people or groups. None of that is implied by saying that no one

is required to do what they are unable to do. As will become clearer below, I leave it as a distinct possibility that they might be required to do what they are very unlikely to do.

Some readers will think that the practicalist opponent I discuss here is a kind of Philistine, not worth taking seriously. If this is a claim about the obviousness of the non-practicalist view I will defend, it will be refuted if, as I predict, subtle thinkers in political theory and philosophy, having heard the arguments, will not be persuaded. Moreover, the non-practicalist view faces a difficult challenge of its own, that of finding a way to explain what is valuable about good political theory if *not* its usefulness in practice. I turn to that question towards the end. I begin, though, by arguing that, under certain plausible conditions, even a true theory of justice might, in principle, have no relevance for political practice.

2. Unrealistic Theory Might Be True

Consider a theory according to which a society would not be just unless annual household incomes were approximately equal. We can all think of difficulties for this particular principle, and adjustments that would render it more plausible, and so on, but that doesn't matter for my purposes. Suppose, further, that this principle (or some principle you prefer to substitute) were virtually certain never to be satisfied. In one sense, then, it is very unrealistic. Would this refute the principle, showing that it couldn't be the correct account of justice? To think so would be to think that justice, whatever it is, will indeed (probably?) be achieved. What basis could there possibly be for this assumption? Justice is a moral standard, and like moral standards generally, whether it is met will depend partly on how people behave. It is not only conceivable that it will never be met; I would hardly be surprised. There is no basis for holding that a theory of justice must be realistic in that particular way, namely, not too unlikely to be satisfied.

Now, a theory that is very likely never to be satisfied might yet have practical implications, so the view we are calling practicalism would not yet have reason to doubt its value. The equal income theory, even if it is unlikely to be satisfied, might nevertheless be worth trying to satisfy, for example. It might be that progress toward justice would be good, and is more likely to be achieved than justice itself. And it might be, depending on circumstances, that efforts toward justice are not risky in any great way, and so there is little to lose and much to gain by trying. If so, the theory would have practical relevance even if we are not very hopeful of success.

However, this is not guaranteed. It depends on many circumstances. Sometimes efforts that are unlikely to succeed should not be undertaken. To illustrate this, consider first a non-political example, and then it can be easily extended. So meet (if you do not already know him) Professor Procrastinate.¹ He is duty-

¹ This scenario is invented and explored by Jackson/Pargetter 1986. There is controversy about whether to accept what they call 'actualism', which would say that whether or not he should accept depends on whether that would be best in light of what he will actually do. I

bound to accept and complete an assignment to write a book review for a journal. (Suppose he owes the journal, or he promised, or whatever.) But he is the sort of person who, even if he accepts the assignment, will put it off and never do it. Should he accept the assignment?

Many believe that Procrastinate ought not to accept. This forces them, awkwardly perhaps, to accept both that he ought not to accept the assignment, and also that he ought to accept and perform the assignment. I will return to that. But first we should notice a political analogue that is germane to our topic. Consider a theory that says we ought to build and comply with certain egalitarian institutions. Suppose we will not comply with them, or not enough, or not enough of us. Depending on the circumstances, then, it might very well be that we should not build them. Again, there is this awkwardness. As we saw, the mere fact that a standard of justice is unlikely to be met does not refute it. By hypothesis, we ought to build and comply with these institutions, but now we are adding something that looks inconsistent: we ought not to build them.

If you hold, as many do at least initially, that this is not only awkward but logically contradictory, then this logical question would be worth some consideration. Accordingly, those who think Procrastinate ought not to accept might defend the consistency of these seemingly discordant positions with the following claim about the logic of ‘ought’ statements: ‘ought’ does not distribute over conjuncts. That is, even if it ought to be the case that A and B, it does not follow, as it might at first seem to follow, that it ought to be the case that A. That would be to treat ‘ought’ distributively, and this is what is being rejected. By rejecting it we could save the claim that the professor ought not to accept the assignment, even though he ought to accept it and perform it. If ‘ought’ were distributive, then, of course, it would be self-contradictory to say both that he ought to accept and perform and that he ought not to accept.

This issue is closely related to the familiar ‘problem of second-best’. When there are several desiderata that are desirable as a package, if one of them is not satisfied, the value of the rest of them is thrown back into question.² More generally, values are often holistic in this way. It is good to have steak sauce and steak. Is it good to have steak sauce? Not necessarily. It depends on whether you will also be having steak. Reflection on this very general structure of values is, I believe, a strong answer to the understandable first impression that if Professor Procrastinate ought to accept and perform, then it would be contradictory to say that he ought not to accept. As against this, it is sensible to argue that while he ought to do both, it is consistent with this to say that since he won’t do both it’s not the case that he ought to accept. Similarly, then, even if justice depends on our building and complying with certain egalitarian institutions, if we won’t comply then (owing to further facts, such as the consequences of building dysfunctional institutions) it’s not the case that we ought to build them. Here’s

am not committed to actualism by the use I make of the example. I say only that if you think it’s not the case that he ought to accept, you are not thereby committed to rejecting ‘He ought to accept and perform’. This is only to deny distributivity of ‘ought’ over conjuncts, not to say whether or not he ought to accept.

² The classic statement is Lipsey/Lancaster 1956/7.

the bottom line, then: That egalitarian theory of what we ought to build and comply with might be correct *even if it lacks the practical implication that we ought to build them*. Being a simple theory, it might also have no other practical implications at all. The truth about justice could conceivably be without practical implications in this way.

There is, nevertheless, an important sense in which even a theory like this is practical even if it lacks what we might call practical relevance. The egalitarian theory I sketched, for example, requires society to build and comply with certain institutions. I will be granting for the sake of argument that if society is unable to do something then it is not morally required to do it (roughly, ‘ought’ implies ‘can’), but there is no such inability in this case. Society perfectly well could build and comply with those institutions. The mere fact that people won’t comply hardly shows that they are unable to do so. There are plenty of other possible explanations. So nothing impossible or unrealizable is being required by the theory, just something unlikely. So, there is no basis for denying that it has the kind of practicality or availability for guiding action that any requirement must have if it is to count as moral or normative. Still, if society won’t comply, then the theory hardly goes on to require that it should nevertheless build the ill-fated institutions. I will describe this as its lack of practical relevance under the circumstances that there will not be compliance—or, for short, its lack of practical relevance.

This is not my main thesis, though I argue for it more extensively elsewhere (see Estlund 2011). I sketch this argument in order to explain why I think it a live possibility that the correct theory of justice might be without practical implications. In what follows I will simply suppose that there is no reason why the correct theory of just could not turn out to be impractical in this way. My main question is this: If it has no practical value what good is it?

3. It’s Not about Truth

I begin with three brief points about the idea of truth as used in this essay. First, I sometimes speak of the true theory of justice, and I use this for present purposes as interchangeable with the ‘correct’ or the ‘best’ theory of justice. It doesn’t matter here whether there is one that is true or best for all societies in all times and places or not. Even if a true or best theory is universal in that way, it could, for reasons sketched above, have no practical implications given unfortunate facts about how people will actually behave.

Secondly, we can immediately put aside a simple account of the value an impractical theory of justice might have, namely the view that it is valuable simply because it is true. Truth is really not such a big deal, and so it is hardly an obvious source of significant value. The telephone book is full of truths, but they are mostly of little importance. That is, they are not the kinds of things it is of much value to know.³ If truths about the fundamental nature of justice are important or valuable to know, this must be for some reason other than

³ The phone book example is from Sosa 2000.

their mere truth, since they share that with the statement of any given person's phone number. Both kinds of statement are true, but truth is not sufficient for importance or value.

A third point about truth is that, not only is it not sufficient for value, it is not necessary. As I defend the possibility of a valuable theory of justice even if it is impractical, I will often speak of the value of a true theory of justice. This is for simplicity. I do not think that the value of impractical theories of justice is likely to be limited to the true one(s). Still, for simplicity, I will suppose that our best hope of identifying the non-practical value of theorizing about justice would lie with an evidently great achievement: a true theory of justice.

4. The Opponent: Practicalism

It will be important to focus sharply on the intellectual practicalist position I hope to rebut, and we can do that in several steps. The guiding idea is that a piece of theorizing (some will limit this to moral or political theorizing, others will not) has no value except in virtue of the product's availability for use in producing something else of value. As a convenience, call the intellectual product of some intellectual work a piece of 'theory'. It might be a proof (alleged or failed), or a set of arguments, or other things amounting to less than would normally be counted as a theory, but it will be useful to have a single name.

Here is a skeptical position about value that is untenable:

Instrumental value as the only kind:

The only kind of value there is (the only kind there is such a thing as, whether or not there are any instances of it) is instrumental: something's having as a consequence, or being a cause, or probabilizer, or available instrument for bringing about (or probably so) something else valuable, or being available for use in any of those ways.

That last clause about availability for use is important, because otherwise much of the medicine in my cabinet would not be counted as having instrumental value, since much of it will never actually be used at all. When we say the value of the ibuprofen is instrumental, we don't mean only that it will have that value only if it gets used. We mean that it is available for use. I will call this *practical* value. My new hammer has practical value whether or not I ever use it. It's true there is also the different kind of value it has if it actually does get used. It was practically valuable in that way yesterday when I used it. We can call these *latent* and *occurrent* varieties of practical value, respectively. Latent practical value is availability for use as occurrently practically valuable, and is a derivative concept in that way. Still, when we speak of something's instrumental or practical value we mean latent at least as often as we mean occurrent practical value. Surely, the practicalist isn't withholding approval from theory whose practical value is only latent, and approving only if it is actually put to use. So the kind of practical value of theory that is in question is the broader kind consisting of

at least latent practical value, some of which will also be put to use and have occurrent practical value.

Since one species of instrumental value is latent practical value, there can be some instances of instrumental value even if there are no instances of non-instrumental value (such as any that might be a consequence). The hammer's instrumental value consists in its being available for a certain use that would have some value as a consequence, and so its value, of that kind, obtains whether or not it is actually used and so whether or not the mentioned good consequence ever obtains. It might seem that, in light of my arguments that instrumental value can't be the only kind, occurrent instrumental value must entail actual instances of non-instrumental value. Even in the case of occurrent instrumental value, however, we can allow that there can be instances of instrumental value in the world even if there are no instances of non-instrumental, overall, good (something philosophers have often argued about).⁴ We do speak of something having instrumental value even when it only probabilizes some other good, or when what it produces (or has as a consequence—or tends to, or is available for use to do so) is only an *improvement*, or a *prevention of something bad* and so not necessarily good, or overall good. My arguments, so far, allow me to admit that there could be instrumental value in the world in those ways even if there are no instances of overall non-instrumental good. Still, none of this would show that there can be such a thing as instrumental value in any of those ways if there were *no such thing as* non-instrumental value (goodness or betterness). Those cases refer, respectively to ingredient non-instrumental value (part of the 'overall' value of a thing), or increase in non-instrumental value (as an 'improvement'), or non-instrumentally valuable absence of some condition (as in 'prevention'). Non-instrumental value is indispensable to those claims.

Some things, including theory, can be available for use simply to promote or achieve an agent's ends, whatever they might be, and this might be thought to be the only kind of value there is. Those things can be said to have a kind of value for that agent apart from any value of the ends. It is natural to call it a kind of instrumental value. Call this *ends-relative instrumental value*. It might be doubted whether this is a kind of value at all, of course, since the ends of the agent in question might be profoundly imprudent, or crazy, or heinous.

We don't need to take sides in that dispute here, since ends-relative instrumental value is not what the intellectual practicalist has in mind. The practicalist holds that intellectual work is valueless unless it has instrumental value, but also, I assume, that some possible kinds of intellectual work have none. They mean to discriminate between some kinds of work and others. This indicates that ends-relative instrumental value would not satisfy them, since there is no possible intellectual work that would be incapable of promoting any possible agent's aims. Agents can, in principle, aim at almost anything. And for any possible intellectual work, how can we rule out that it might amuse someone or other, an amusement that could be some agent's aim? Since the practicalist holds that some kinds of intellectual work would have no value because they would lack instrumental value, this can't mean ends-relative instrumental value.

⁴ For a good discussion and bibliography on these issues, see Conee 1982.

So, this kind of value—ends-relative value—doesn't rebut my arguments that if there is such a thing as value of the kind the practicalist allows ('practical value'), there must be such a thing as non-instrumental value. The point of all this is that if instrumental value is not the only kind, then that suggestion can't be used as a simple way to assume that intellectual work is only valuable if it's instrumentally valuable. Perhaps it has, as some things must have, non-instrumental value. My suggestion, that some political theory might be valuable apart from any further consequences it might be used to produce, cannot be impugned on the basis of the view that while some political theory is valuable, the only kind of value is instrumental. That view is incoherent.

Practicalism privileges practice over theory, or action over thought, in the following way: theory (thought) is only valuable insofar as it facilitates valuable practice (action). This might be expressed in this extreme way:

Action Is All:

Nothing other than valuable action is valuable at all except insofar as it could be useful in valuable action.

This is an absurd preoccupation with activity or action. On this view, surgical correction of a congenital facial disfigurement, or a chronically painful condition, is not valuable except insofar as it facilitates further valuable *action*. The practicalist position I want to contend with would not imply these absurd things, and would accept that a piece of theory that led to a cure for cancer would be valuable quite apart from whether those who are cured go on to perform valuable activities. Their living longer and being free of pain would be enough.

For an additional reason, as well, *Action Is All* doesn't quite get us to the issue I want to discuss. The reason is that it is too unclear whether theorizing might itself be a species of valuable action. In that case it wouldn't need to be conducive to further valuable action after all. That ecumenical position is obviously not the practicalist view I want to challenge. So we can sharpen the position in this way:

Intellectual Practicalism:

No piece of theory is valuable except insofar as it could be used to produce something else (other than theory) that is valuable.

This is the target position, which I'll call *intellectual practicalism*, or *practicalism* for short. I won't worry about how directly, or with what likelihood the additional valuable thing must be produced, but I will assume (to capture the spirit of the view I am responding to) that it needn't be actually successful in order to have the described instrumental value. As I've stated the practicalist view, it does not treat political theory as a special category, although that would be a narrower variant, practicalism about specifically political theory. Rather, it is a more general principle that might be offered in explanation of the practicalist view of political theory, and I will assess it first in this general form. In *section 5*, I will consider a narrow version limited to normative theory.

Practicalism (unlike *Action is All*) allows that there might be valuable things other than activities. For all it says, the value of some physical activity, or some

physical product, or a less pain-ridden life, could be non-instrumental (even intrinsic, which adds non-relational). But not so for intellectual activities or products. This discrimination against intellectual activity and products would seem to call for some explanation. The idea that there is only instrumental value has been discarded, so that cannot be the charge against impractical intellectual work. If anything has value, some things have non-instrumental value. Why, then, couldn't some intellectual work be among these non-instrumentally valuable things? What support might be offered for intellectual practicalism?

I confess, I do not know of any consideration that counts significantly in favor of this position. While this hardly refutes it, if it lacks any palpable support then it cannot be recited as if it poses a difficulty for the opposing view—the view that some theory, such as a theory of justice, may be valuable even if it has no practical value. This is the challenge I wish to pose for practicalism: unless some support can be marshaled, the practicalist ought to be chastened.

5. Normative Intellectual Practicalism

Even if it fails in that general form, there may be more to be said for a narrower form of practicalism limited to normative moral and political theory or philosophy. Call it,

Normative intellectual practicalism:

No piece of normative moral or political theory is valuable except insofar as it could be used to produce something else (other than theory) that is valuable.

The fact that some theory is about normative matters, matters about which conclusions must, in some sense, be practical or action-guiding, does not immediately imply that normative theory must itself be of any practical value. Suppose, for example, that understanding the theory would not help anyone do anything. In one such case, they might all be weak-willed. In another case, even if they are morally quite good, the theory might not be telling them anything normative that they didn't already know or assume. It is surely not a condition on a moral theory's truth or soundness that it imply normative conclusions that were not already widely accepted. So, the assumption that good moral or political theory is bound to be useful in practice in some way has no basis in the normativity of the subject matter. Perhaps it is based on the conjecture that good normative theory seems likely to conflict with many existing moral and political normative views, and that understanding the theory will tend to improve these views, and that improving these views will tend to change action for the better. None of this is guaranteed, and it is no condition on a sound moral or political theory that all these contingencies be in place.

Normative claims are often said to be 'action-guiding', but this is not the same as supposing that knowing them will change action. Professor Procrastinate, who will not write the review even if he accepts the assignment, is under a moral requirement that is action-guiding in one way, but not in another. It

requires something that he could indeed do: accept and perform the task. The requirement is as action-guiding in that respect as can ever be required of a normative claim. But in deciding whether to accept the assignment, is the requirement action-guiding? I would say that it is not. It yields no requirement to accept, as we have seen. It leaves that choice completely untouched. That is the kind of practical irrelevance that an egalitarian theory of justice might have if the society would not comply with the institutions if it build them. It ought to be guided, in its actions, so as to both build and comply. But in the circumstance where it will not comply, there remains a choice whether to build them. On that matter the simple egalitarian theory of justice, which requires building and complying, is completely silent—it is not available to guide action in that setting.

In light of these points I am not aware of any reason to think that intellectual practicalism has any special purchase on normative theory that it does not have on theory generally.⁵

6. What Good Is It?

There is a challenge for the non-practicalist too. It is perfectly fair for someone with practicalist sympathies, to ask, about an allegedly valuable piece of theorizing, *what is good about it*. Even if it is allowed for the sake of argument by the chastened practicalist that the answer wouldn't need to point to the theory's practical value, it would seem reasonable to ask what practical *or non-practical* value it has. This is a fair challenge, and a difficult one. When the value of a piece of intellectual work does not consist in its practical value, it is hard to know what to say when asked in what this value *does* consist. I will eventually try to make modest progress on this in the case of a theory of justice. For now I want to make two points. First, an obvious but important point: the fact that no answer is forthcoming would not refute the value claim. The reason is that just because nothing can be offered in support of a claim of that kind of value does not show that the value claim is false. There might be value of just that kind, and we have seen no argument to the contrary. Granted, if nothing more can be said in support of an alleged instance of valuable impractical political theory, even if it isn't refuted the theorist with that view should be chastened.

It might be thought that even if there could be such value, there could never be reason to believe there is. But we should not confuse two distinct challenges here. One challenge is the difficulty of saying in what the value of some intellectual activity consists. A quite distinct challenge is the difficulty of offering reason to believe it has such value. To see how these are different, suppose that (at least) innocent pleasure is valuable in itself. When asked what is good about it, there may be nothing more to say, beyond 'It just is'. That doesn't show that there is no reason to believe it. The fact that philosophers whom I judge

⁵ Adam Swift argues that there is no evident reason for holding political philosophy to a practicalist standard that would not appear to be appropriate in other areas of intellectual endeavor. See Swift 2008.

to be brilliant and sensible believe it seems to be some reason for me to believe it. It's hardly proof, but that wasn't the question.⁶ Maybe there are also other kinds of reasons to believe that certain things are good in themselves, or maybe not. My point is that none of this is ruled out even if there is nothing at all to say about what is good about them. To mark this point with some terminology, let's distinguish between *value support* for a value claim, and *evidence* for it.

Without any value support, and in the absence of other strong evidence, this dead-end would leave the non-practicalist with nothing to say against the practicalist. Neither has anything to say in support of their position, but nor have we seen any strong evidence or argument against them. Both ought to be chastened. Even if this impasse is the end of the story, we will still have learned this much: neither position can support itself by pointing to the alleged absurdity of the alternative. Practicalism has, so far as we have seen, no basis on which to show that non-practicalism is untenable, and vice versa.

I am not sure it is the end of the story, however. The failure of intellectual practicalism as a general theory does not imply that any intellectual work has any value. It neither implies about any particular impractical intellectual work that it is valuable, nor does it even imply that any impractical intellectual work is valuable. All we have seen so far is that a piece of work's being impractical intellectual work does not somehow guarantee that it has no value. It remains as a further question whether any of it does have value. In particular, even if there is no strong basis for practicalism as a general theory, this settles nothing about whether any impractical political theory has value. Even if some things might, in principle, have non-practical value, what is good about *this*? It would be good to have a conception of what would count as an adequate answer, even if it is doubted that such an answer is available. If it is asked, 'what is good about this instance of impractical political theory?' what sort of thing would count as an adequate answer? I will return to this question at the end of this essay.

First, though, I want to reflect on the case of mathematics. The reason is that it is a rich context for thinking about practical and non-practical value of intellectual work whose truth is beyond doubt.

7. Pure Mathematics and Practical Value

What is valuable about mathematical research? Consider, especially, what is often referred to as 'pure mathematics', those areas of the subject that are pursued for reasons other than any practical value they might turn out to have.⁷

⁶ I haven't here taken a stand on whether I should revise my degree of belief in the face of those apparent experts. That's a separate question. It's less contentious to say what I have said, that the fact that they believe it is some reason for me to believe it. On the further question about revision, see Christiansen 2009.

⁷ For several definitions of 'pure math' see Hardy 1940. In Section 23, Hardy appears to define it as math that is pursued in independence from any applicability it might have to the physical world. On the account I'm using, even 'applied mathematics' in his sense might count as pure: pursued out of curiosity alone rather than for any hope of practical appli-

Perhaps even pure mathematics has practical value, a question I will consider. But suppose much of it doesn't, or at least that it seems to have a value that doesn't depend on this. In that case, it is fair to ask what is valuable about it.

If you think math can have non-practical value then you cannot deny political theory value on the ground that it has no practical value. My aim in this section is only to argue that much math that is thought by many (including most of my readers, I suspect) to be important and valuable intellectual work has little or no practical value. In that case, either it has no value after all, or some intellectual work with no practical value can nevertheless be of great value. It is very difficult to say what is valuable about it, but we are not, I think, inclined to doubt, for that reason, that it has value. This ought to inform our approach to the case of non-practical political theory.

Much of mathematics obviously has practical importance of the highest order. For one thing, as a general field, mathematics is inseparable from science, and all of the great practical accomplishments of biology, engineering, medicine, statistics, economics, and much else. However, there is more to math than its practical application. In wondering whether all valuable math is practically valuable, it is important to put aside several irrelevant meanings of 'application'.

In one sense, of course, mathematics can apply to the world even if it has no practical application. The geometry of a sphere applies (roughly) to the surface of the earth. This means simply that it accurately describes or represents it. This doesn't yet mean that it has any practical value. (It does have practical value, of course, but that's a different claim.) Descriptive applicability isn't the same thing as practical applicability.

Mathematicians also speak of applicability in several other senses that are not the one we're wondering about. One is applicability to the (other) sciences. This, again, should not be confused with practical applicability.⁸ Consider a mathematical technique that is helpful in understanding population genetics in biology. This enhanced understanding might, of course, also be of some practical use (use for some non-intellectual practice), but this is hardly guaranteed. The basic mechanisms of population genetics might already be sufficiently understood for all practical purposes, the knowledge coming from some interplay of mathematical, empirical and other insights. Still, the mathematics might not yet be fully worked out, and the technique in question might finally facilitate that. The technique is applicable to science, but not of any practical applicability in that case. The applicability of a piece of math to the sciences would not yet establish practical applicability.

Finally, much math is applicable to other areas of math. This is generally regarded by mathematicians as increasing the value or importance of the work, but, by itself, it is not practical applicability in the sense that concerns us. Of course, it is practical applicability in a way, since it is useful in the doing of

cation. WordNet (copyright Princeton University 2006. See <http://wordnet.princeton.edu>): "pure mathematics: the branches of mathematics that study and develop the principles of mathematics for their own sake rather than for their immediate usefulness."

⁸ Browder 1984 emphasizes how much of math has surprising application to the sciences. I don't deny that, of course, and much of what I'm saying about pure mathematics is granted by his regarding this fact as surprising.

something else, certain other math. But the challenge to unrealistic theories of justice that concerns us would not be satisfied by learning that they are applicable to other areas of non-practical political theory. The challenge is to theories that have no applicability to non-intellectual practice, such as improving people's lives, or promoting justice in the world. A piece of math's applicability to other areas of math would not count as practical applicability in the sense that matters here.

8. The Basic Research Model

The *field* of mathematics, or even of pure mathematics, certainly has practical value. But this is not our question, which is not about the value of a whole field, but about the value of particular instances of intellectual work that do not themselves have practical value. These are what the practicalist criticizes. The field of political theory, even 'pure' political theory—that which is pursued for reasons other than any hope of practical value—can be granted by the practicalist to have lots of practical value. This just means that many instances of that kind of theorizing turn out to have practical value, just as many cases of pure mathematics turn out to have such value. But, then, why not think that this is where the sole value of such work lies?

Consider the *basic research model* of the value of non-practical political theory. As a strategy for producing research that has practical value, it will make sense to arrange for lots of basic research that is not practically motivated. On this model, the value of a piece of intellectual or scientific work derives from the practical value of the larger enterprise of which it is a part. Basic research is sometimes defined as work that is motivated by curiosity rather than by any practical concern, and that parallels our working conception of pure mathematics.⁹ Such work will sometimes turn out to have practical value even if this was not the goal. Indeed, in many areas of human knowledge, it is unknown what practical value, if any, progress in those areas might have. If the only research that took place were motivated by practical value, many of these areas would remain under-explored even though it seems likely that more exploration would have great practical value of kinds we cannot now envision.

It is important to avoid an obvious ambiguity. That is, the motivation for encouraging or facilitating lots of pure research is indeed wholly practical. We can mark that by saying that *externally* it is practically motivated. However, we also need to mark that the kind of research that is so motivated is pure or basic, and so *internally* motivated by curiosity rather than by any practical concern. Return, for a moment, to the question of the value of pure mathematics. Since so much practical value can be expected to flow from even pure mathematics, there is great practical value in promoting that kind of research—research that has (internally) no practical motive. If we ask about the value of a piece of pure mathematics, the basic research model answers this way: pure mathematics as

⁹ See this webpage on the idea of basic vs. applied research: <http://www.lbl.gov/Education/ELSI/research-main.html>.

a field of inquiry promises great practical value, and so it is a valuable field of endeavor. So consider this view:

Basic Research Model:

The value of any instance of pure research (such as pure math) consists entirely in its being a part of a practically valuable field of endeavor.

If there is a strong practical case of this kind for encouraging work in pure mathematics, is there is an analogy in the case of pure political theory? If so, it must go like this: there are questions in political theory whose practical value, if any, is difficult to guess. Nevertheless, there is probably great practical value to be found in those areas in ways we can't specifically anticipate. If the only kind of political theory that were done were internally motivated by the prospect of practical value these other areas would be underexplored, and much practical value will be missed. It would make sense, then, as a strategy for producing great practical value that could be produced in no other way, to promote and encourage pure political theory—research not internally motivated by any prospect of practical value, but only by curiosity. And so on. On the basic research model, the value of any instance of pure political theory has its value simply as a part of a practically valuable field of endeavor.

Is there a plausible basic research rationale of that kind for the support of pure political theory, as there plainly is for pure mathematics? I won't try to answer that here. I will observe only that, for this purpose, we wouldn't need uncontroversial examples. The argument doesn't depend on any claim about agreement. If you, the reader, accept certain examples, then let us work with those. Recall, too, that we also would not need examples that actually made a practical difference, since this is not the relevant criterion of something's having practical value. My practicalist opponent is not dismissing the value of all political theory that is not, in fact, put to successful use. In any case, maybe there are good external practical reasons for promoting and encouraging even pure political philosophy, though I won't pursue the question further here. If so, that would be one important kind of defense of that kind of work. Pause for a moment to give this important point its due, and to recognize that it would answer, in a significant way, the practicalist critique of the kind of non-practical political theory we have been considering.

As important as that point is, I do not believe it is an adequate account of the value of pure intellectual work. To see why, return to the case of pure mathematics. The encouragement and promotion of work of that kind is said to be valuable because some work of great practical value will probably result only in this way. However, what about the many *instances* of pure mathematical research that do not themselves have any practical value? I don't just mean instances with no foreseen practical value, but work with no practical value, in fact. We can't know for sure which work this is at any given time, since any instance might turn out to have practical value after all, but never mind; imagine some work that we stipulate has no practical value. On the basic research account an instance of pure research that has *no value at all*. It is a part of an

endeavor that, as a whole, has practical value, but it does not contribute to it. Encouraging even this instance of work may indeed, have practical value insofar as it helps to encourage pure research more generally, some of which will turn out to have practical value. But none of this allows the basic research model to say that this instance of such work, lacking any practical value of its own, either directly or indirectly, has any value at all. The basic research model is not an adequate account of the value of instances of pure research unless this implication of the model is itself acceptable. I don't propose to settle it, but it is important to test the idea intuitively, to see whether something seems to have gone wrong. It is clear, I think, that the idea that instances of pure mathematical research that themselves have no practical value have no value at all is inconsistent with natural and widespread ways of thinking. Maybe we should give them up, but we first need to be clear about the tension.

In an important lecture in 1900, the great mathematician David Hilbert argued that, even while the origins of mathematical thinking “spring from experience and are suggested by the world of external phenomena” (which doesn't yet grant a *practical* motive), nevertheless,

“[...] in the further development of a branch of mathematics, the human mind, encouraged by the success of its solutions, becomes conscious of its independence. It evolves from itself alone, often without appreciable influence from without, [...] and appears then itself as the real questioner. Thus arose the problem of prime numbers and the other problems of number theory, Galois's theory of equations, the theory of algebraic invariants, the theory of abelian and automorphic functions; indeed almost all the nicer questions of modern arithmetic and function theory arise in this way.” (Hilbert 1900, 141)

Many of these directions turned out to have practical value. I readily grant that, of course. But we have no reason to doubt Hilbert's suggestion that this was no part of the motivation, and that the motives were those of intellectual curiosity itself. Once that fact of pure motivation is established, we can turn to examples of work that were not only motivated without practical concern, but also had no practical value after all. My argument does not require that any cases of ostensibly important mathematical work actually turn out to be without practical value (although I strongly suspect there is a great deal of such work). The question is only this, whether if that were so that instance of work would be without value.

Mathematicians have a rough consensus about the great importance of certain mathematical problems. A look at these problems suggests that the motives for solving them do not rest on any evident practical value their solutions would have. Keep in mind that, of course, mathematicians will be aware of the more external practical value that pursuing these problems might have, but that is no objection here. My claim, and I think it is very difficult to deny, is that there are many problems in mathematics that mathematicians (and many others) regard as highly important independent of any anticipated practical value their

solution might have. In the same lecture quoted earlier, Hilbert listed (as a ‘sample’) twenty-three important mathematical problems (Hilbert 1900) There is not a word about practical application in his lecture, and only one reference to applicability other sciences.¹⁰

Many of Hilbert’s listed problems have since been solved. In the year 2000, the Clay Mathematics Institute announced the promise of large prize money, a million dollars per problem solved, for the solution of any of seven mathematical problems. Among these they cite the Reimann Hypothesis as “the most important open problem in pure mathematics”.¹¹ The Reimann Hypothesis, a theorem about the distribution of prime numbers, was one of the great problems listed by Hilbert in 1900, and it remains unsolved to this day. The hypothesis itself is apparently widely believed by mathematicians even though it is not proven.¹² The theorem itself may have practical uses, I’m not sure. But here is a different question: would a *proof* of the theorem have great additional practical value? It is proof that is widely regarded as being of enormous importance, but it is far from clear that it would have much, if any, practical value. In that case, any great value or importance of such a proof must be of some non-practical kind.

This discussion of pure mathematics suggests two things. First, what are generally regarded as great achievements in mathematics, and a fortiori as great achievements, are often instances of pure mathematical work, pursued apart from any internal motive of their being of practical value. Second, the practicalist effort to account for the value of these achievements as instances of a larger institution of basic research, deriving their value from the practical value (which is not in dispute) of the institution, would have no way to account for the value of the many individual mathematical achievements that are widely regarded as great whether or not they, themselves, have any practical value. The practicalist might insist that it is natural to treat these achievements as great, since praising them is part of the practically valuable project of encouraging such pure research. But the practicalist must add: these achievements really have no value, and our treating them as such is a white lie. If this is too much to swallow, then practicalism must be rejected. It is fair enough to point out that we have not explained what is valuable about such mathematical achievements, and this is admittedly a difficult task. But, even so, the dilemma for the practicalist remains: either they have no value at all, or practicalism is false.

Here is a revised version of the basic research model, one for which the problem may seem to be less serious:

Value by intellectual causation:

Impractical pure research might yet have value insofar as it causally contributes, (by way of its being understood (not just any causal route)), to the production of practically valuable work.

¹⁰ Hilbert 1900, problem number 6: “Mathematical treatment of the axioms of physics.”

¹¹ See http://www.claymath.org/millennium/Rules_etc/history.php. Retrieved 9/18/2010.

¹² “[...] it is fair to say that today there is quite a bit of evidence in its favor.” (Bombieri 2006, 112)

This probably dismisses much less of the non-practical work than the simple basic research model. I want to pause and accept that this, again, is an important kind of value of non-practical intellectual work. It gives the non-practicalist much of what was wanted. However, it still seems to miss much of the real value in this kind of case. The problem is that on this view there is no value in figuring out the truth.

Consider Jack and Jill, both of whom are scientists, or mathematicians, or political philosophers/theorists, each of whom produce a theory on the same question Q. Suppose either theory would have significant intellectual causality for practically valuable work, but neither more than the other. However, Jack's theory amounts to mistake upon mistake, with a mistaken conclusion. Nevertheless, by understanding it, and the mistakes, others will tend to be led to practically valuable theories. Jill's theory is just as fruitful for practical work, but has this difference: it gets it right. Right assumptions, right reasoning, right conclusion. She has discovered the answer (and its underlying explanation) to question Q. On the basic research model—even in the less stingy intellectual causation version—Jill's discovery is of no more value than Jack's. Her having gotten it right adds no value. Indeed, if Jack's false theory is slightly more fruitful, it is the more valuable achievement on this view.

The basic research models have been attempts to account for the value of even some of the non-practical achievements of pure mathematics in practicalist terms. I have argued that even though they identify important dimensions of value, they are inadequate. I turn, next, to two ways of trying to account for the value in frankly non-practical terms: the ramification account and the virtuosity account. After arguing that they fail, I offer a further non-practicalist account of the value of such achievements as proving Reimann's hypothesis or coming to understand justice.

9. The Ramification Account and Its Failure

In his poignant reflection on the value of pure mathematics, Hardy claimed,

“[V]ery little of mathematics is useful practically, and . . . that little is comparatively dull. The ‘seriousness’ of a mathematical theorem lies, not in its practical consequences, which are usually negligible, but in the *significance* of the mathematical ideas which it connects. We may say, roughly, that a mathematical idea is ‘significant’ if it can be connected, in a natural and illuminating way, with a large complex of other mathematical ideas.”¹³

It is only roughly stated, but let us call this the *ramification account* of the value of non-practical mathematics. It says that a piece of mathematics has a

¹³ A Mathematician's Apology, op. cit. section 11. Philip Kitcher, in his book, *The Nature of Mathematical Knowledge*, notes his sympathy with Hardy, at least insofar as, “[o]ne would be hard pressed to explain the utility of number theory (one of Hardy's favorite fields)” (Kitcher 1984, 9).

kind of non-practical value if it has ramifications of certain kinds (to be specified by a fuller account) for many other mathematical ideas. There are many ways in which this might be spelled out. For example, ramifications might refer to relations of logical implication, or to something else altogether. Also, it might be that the work's ramifications, whether they are known or not, themselves give the work value, or alternatively the fact that such ramifications could come to be known. Still, I believe all versions of the ramification account will tend to face the following problem. In order for the bearing of one thing on another thing to lend some kind of value to that first thing, there must be value either in the second thing, or in the bearing relation itself. If a piece of math is important because of some bearing it has on other pieces of math, this must either be because that other math is important, or because the relation itself is somehow important. Either way, the question of what kind of value we have on our hands has been postponed but not answered. The bearing of one chess problem on a thousand other chess problems would never convince Hardy that the first one is serious and valuable mathematics. A piece of math might well be important if it bears on an *important* math problem, but what makes that second math problem important? Our question is just postponed. It is no help in understanding the value of one thing to cite its connection to another thing if we have no reason to accept either that the other thing is valuable, or that there is some other way in which the connection itself is valuable. But if it's the connection itself, where none of the connected things (certain instances of knowledge, for example) is assumed to be of any value, what kind of value is this bare connection supposed to have? Without answers to these questions, the ramification model does not appear to be a promising account of the value of non-practical intellectual work, including mathematics, and including political philosophy.

10. Virtuosity

There is an impulse to point to the rarity, difficulty, or the display of prodigious skill in certain achievements as the source of their value. Group these together as *virtuosity* accounts.¹⁴ Many have tried, and failed, to prove Fermat's Last Theorem, and then someone succeeds. Let's grant that there is value in this virtuosity itself. The question is whether this accounts for the *great* value many of us believe that it has. Compare the proof to the performance of five aerial flips on the flying trapeze, something that has (I believe) never been achieved. Suppose it was finally accomplished. Perhaps you think proving the theorem is even more difficult, but then we only need to add another flip or two to surpass its difficulty. Or you might think that they aren't comparable because one is an intellectual achievement, the other physical. So compare the proof to the memorization of three hundred people's names in ten minutes, or to summing a huge string of numbers (or complicate it with whatever operations you please). Difficulty, rarity, or display of skill, as valuable as they might be, just don't account for the value that is present when they are deployed in order to do

¹⁴ I'm grateful for discussion of such suggestions with Matt Smith and Russell Hardin.

something more valuable than these. Such things might be a great achievement in one sense, and the achievement might be of great value of a certain kind. But it is not the achievement of something of great value. Two mathematical proofs might be equally difficult and elusive, with only one of them being of any importance, and the other being a brilliant case of ‘recreational mathematics’ by Martin Gardner (see, for example, Gardner 1994).

Political philosophy can display virtuosity too. There might be great scholarly erudition, logical incisiveness, and so on. But consider a case in which these are displayed in the course of an arbitrary task, such as devising the most defensible principles of justice that could be devised on the arbitrary supposition that the earth contained only one species and one gender, or that the earth was flat and infinite in size. Certainly, this might be accomplished in a way that shows a kind of greatness, or even philosophical genius. But it would not be any great achievement. The value of non-practical intellectual work is not exhausted by virtuosity of any kind, and so we haven’t yet identified the basis of its value.

11. Important Things Are Valuable to Understand

We have been supposing that when something is put forward as having non-practical value there is normally little to offer by way of value support for this claim. This is not quite so, for reasons I now want to consider more closely. Suppose someone asks, ‘What is valuable about the fun you had last night?’ Even if the value of the fun is not instrumental, still, there is something more to say, and it is a kind of value support: ‘It is a case of innocent higher pleasure.’ This offers value support. If the questioning continues, ‘What is good about the innocent higher pleasure you had last night?’ then there may be no more value support to offer: ‘It just is.’ But value support has been offered for the claim that last night’s fun was (not just fun but) valuable. The lesson is this:

Value location as value support:

A claim that something has non-practical value can be given value support if there is a way to locate it in a heretofore unmentioned category of value.

As I will explain, I propose this principle as an explanation of why some knowledge or understanding, such as the understanding of justice, is important even though much knowledge and understanding is not.¹⁵

It is unsatisfying, when asked what is valuable about some non-practical intellectual work, to be told that it ‘just is’. It may be that any view about value will be committed to some basic values for which it cannot supply any further value support, but some of these, such as human well-being (maybe only

¹⁵ I am not sure whether, or in what way, the best form of this idea is about knowledge or understanding, or whether, or in what way, it is about value or importance. I do not assume knowledge and understanding are the same thing, or that value and importance are the same, but I will use the terms interchangeably (within each pair) only to keep alive these further questions.

if innocent, etc.), will be acceptable to a wide audience and so it can be taken as common ground for purposes of reasoning. However, there is no such wide agreement on the value of non-practical normative political theory, and so it cannot just be taken as common ground. The question is whether value support can be offered by way of value location.

The view that political theory has no value unless it has practical value must hold that there are some valuable things which, if a piece of political theory promoted them, would render that political theory valuable as an instrument for that production. The indictment is that, while there are valuable things the promotion of which would render political theory valuable, non-practical political theory (being non-practical) does not promote them. So consider one candidate for the kind of value whose promotion is missing.

Theorists who think the value of political theory could only be practical will, in my experience, often cite the practical aim of social justice. It is thought to be a goal whose own value would render any political theory that tended to promote it practically valuable, and so valuable. So we might ask, since justice is so valuable, is it an important question what justice is? This practicalist must answer that understanding justice is only valuable insofar as that understanding itself promotes justice or other good things. But, in evaluating that contention, we need to acknowledge that, as I argued earlier, understanding justice might or might not have such practical value. What we ought to do under such circumstances will be determined by asking not what justice is, but what we should do when justice is, in these ways, bound not to be achieved. There is valuable theoretical work that could help there, of course. Our question, though, is not about that kind of 'realistic' or concessive theorizing. We are asking about the value of the different theoretical project of understanding what justice is and what it requires. Supposing that understanding justice would, for reasons such as these, have no practical value, are we to suppose that it would have no value at all?

Here is the modest progress I believe we can make in this dispute. It will, as I said, be unsatisfying to say that understanding 'just is' valuable even with no practical value. It is somewhat more substantial to say the following: what justice is, is an important question because justice is an important thing. Understanding justice is important whether or not that understanding promotes justice or anything else valuable, because it is the understanding of something which is, in itself, important. This offers value support by way of value location: understanding justice is said to be an instance of a category of value: the understanding of something that is itself (as all agree) important. At the very least, this is more than saying it is valuable simply because it is understanding. That attempt at value support by value location would not be plausible, since some understanding is of trivial things and so not important at all.

There are two steps then. One is to note that the understanding of justice can be lent value support by value location. The second is to locate it in a more plausible category of value than simply knowledge or understanding itself, namely the narrower category of the understanding of important things. Here,

then, is a principle that may be helpful in refuting practicalism about normative political theory:

Understanding What is Important is Valuable:

If something is a great value, then it is, at least on that basis, and in that particular way, valuable to understand that thing even apart from whether that understanding has any practical value.¹⁶

This is hardly indisputable, of course. But for now it is important to see that it goes one step beyond simply saying that understanding justice ‘just is’ valuable. It grounds that claim in a more general principle. If it is asked what *is* valuable about understanding what is important (as the principle claims), then we will have to see how much more can be said, if anything. Just as the practicalist might have little to say in support of the value of justice beyond ‘it just is’, we might have little to say in support of the value of understanding what justice is.

For some purposes we can learn from the case of mathematical knowledge, but unfortunately my strategy here does not seem to apply there in any obvious way. So we have not accounted for the value of mathematical knowledge when it has no practical value. Surely not all mathematical knowledge has (significant) value, but I have argued that much of it does, and even much that has no practical value. What we don’t have is any account of which non-practical math has significant value, or any value support for thinking it does other than saying ‘it just does’. If some account of that is found, then it may supply a second sort of ground for the value of non-practical political theory about important things like justice, though it might not apply at all.

12. Conclusion

The true or best theory of justice might or might not have any practical value. Even if this is granted, it might be asked what good it is. If the question evinces skepticism about the possibility of non-practical value of intellectual work, the case of pure mathematics is difficult for that skeptical view to handle. However, the questioner might not be skeptical about the very possibility of its having non-practical value, asking only for some kind of value support for the claim that a true but non-practical account of justice does indeed have some such value. This challenger allows that there are non-practical kinds of value, and must admit that demands for deeper value support always come to an end somewhere. This is no special problem for the question what good a non-practical theory of justice is. Still, rather than resting with ‘It just is’, perhaps one increment of deeper value support can be offered: such a theory would be a case of understanding something that is, itself, (as all sides grant) important, namely justice. If it is

¹⁶ This principle does not assert that such understanding has its value as a contribution to the quality of the knower’s life. On some views of a good human life, some kinds of knowledge are especially valuable ingredients. (See Hurka 2011 and important criticism by Kraut 2011). Hurka’s view has some similarity to the ramification account sketched earlier, but again, as I considered that idea it did not rest the value of knowledge on its contribution to well-being.

asked what is good about that understanding, or, notably, if the practicalist is asked what is important about justice itself, both may be left with nothing to say beyond, 'It just is'.

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