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Comment on David Estlund. What Good Is it?—Unrealistic Political Theory and the Value of Intellectual Work

1. Introduction

David Estlund's article invites debate about an important question: what is the value of political philosophy if it does not have any impact on real world politics? Are impractical theories of, say, justice necessarily valueless (this is the position Estlund calls *practicalism*), or could they have value independently of their practical applicability (this is what *non-practicalism* claims)? Perhaps our intuitions are undecided at first, wavering back and forth between the two positions. But what if the impractical theory turned out to be true? In that case, our intuitions would probably settle for non-practicalism. There seems to be *some* value to a true theory of justice, even if it is impractical.

The challenge for non-practicalism is to state what this value might be. As Estlund convincingly argues, if it does not rise to the challenge, it is not thereby refuted; but without any substantial account of the value of true impractical theories, it becomes easier for the practicalist to bite the bullet and accept the counter-intuitive consequence of his position. Estlund's paper thus ends with a proposal for what value true theories of justice might have independently of their practical usefulness. After having shown that a) it is indeed possible that the true theory of justice might be impractical, b) practicalism does not have any convincing arguments against non-practicalism, and c) our intuitions should tend towards non-practicalism anyway, given also the case of pure mathematics, he turns to discussing several options of accounting for these intuitions. He dismisses the idea that it is truth itself that makes a true impractical theory valuable. The ramification and virtuosity accounts fail as well. According to him, the theory in question is valuable simply because it contributes to our understanding of something important, namely justice.

In the following, I want to raise three questions about Estlund's argument and his proposal. The first is about how to understand the practicalist position; the second and third are about his own account of non-practicalist value.

2. Practicalism—What Is It?

As mentioned, according to Estlund, practicalism is the position that a theory of justice has to be practical in order to be valuable. What exactly is meant by ‘practical’, however? It cannot mean ‘will actually be implemented’ since that would be a highly implausible standard for any theory. Just as the manual for building a radio would not become impractical simply because no one ever used it to build a radio (perhaps no one ever got around to doing it, or it was hidden in a place no one knew about), a theory of justice would not become impractical simply because it happened to never be implemented.

Rather, ‘practical’ should be understood as ‘practic-able’, so that a theory would be practical if it is *possible* to implement it. Though not in the broad sense of ‘humanly possible’, because otherwise non-practicalism would have to deny the principle that ‘ought implies can’¹ and Estlund explicitly does not want to do so here. In any case, if a practicalist was satisfied as soon as a theory conformed to the principle of ‘ought implies can’, it would be much more difficult to show that there are any cases of true but impractical theories of justice. In other words: step a) in Estlund’s argument would be far less convincing. For at least at first sight it seems that a theory of justice that is literally impossible to realize has no normative force at all and hence, cannot be true.

‘Practical’ must mean something more specific than, for example ‘likely or at least not too unlikely to be implemented’. According to this formulation, practicalism appears to favor theories that are most likely to have practical impact. However, the more likely a theory of justice is to be implemented, the less demanding it will be and the less it will actually alter the status quo. Assuming that the status quo is not just (which practicalists have to assume because otherwise, according to practicalism itself, there would be no point in theorizing at all),² this should make us suspicious of the truth of all too easily realizable theories.

So then it should be something more like ‘neither too likely nor too unlikely to be implemented’.³ This remains difficult to understand, however. Apart from being vague, of course, we might still have the following worry. Probabilities change from situation to situation. What would be very unlikely in one context might be much more likely in another. But then every theory of justice that satisfies the minimal requirement of ‘ought implies can’ will fall within the practicalist range at certain times and in certain situations. Given that, as Estlund points out, theories would not have to be currently applicable to be practically valuable, but could have *latent* practical value (just as the medicine in your cabinet does not have to be in current use to have any practical value, to use

¹ Non-practicalism would have to deny that ‘ought implies can’ in this case, because it would then have to allow for the possibility of a true theory of justice demanding things of human beings that, *qua* human beings, they are simply incapable of doing.

² Given that according to practicalism, theorizing about justice is valuable only insofar as it can contribute to making the world more just, there would be no more value in theorizing as soon as the world was as just as it could possibly be.

³ This is in fact what Estlund proposes in his draft paper ‘Utopophobia’. There, he argues that practicalism restricts value to ‘non-complacent but hopeful’ theories.

Estlund's own example), why could we not think of every theory that satisfies the minimal requirement as having either current or latent practical value? A theory that is very unlikely to have practical relevance in one context could still be practically valuable then, only latently so—that is, until the context changes to one in which it is applicable. In that case, what theories is practicalism actually attacking as being impractical? Again, step a) in the argument becomes questionable: are there really any true theories of justice that have no practical value whatsoever, not even latent value?

Even if all true theories of justice turn out to have some sort of practical value, however, the question of whether they have any value over and above their practical value is still a valid one. So I am not casting doubt on the importance of the general question. All I am saying here is that what practicalism actually is—which types of theories it recommends and which ones it condemns—remains unclear.

3. Is Non-practical Value Not about Truth at All?

My second question concerns Estlund's argument that truth is neither sufficient (1) nor necessary (2) for a theory to be valuable apart from being practically valuable. While I grant that some truths are not worth knowing (such as the phone-book truths Estlund mentions), so that it is not sufficient for a theory to be true in order to be valuable, I wonder whether claim 2 should be qualified.

True, in the light of Estlund's own account that understanding important things such as justice is valuable, it makes sense that a theory does not have to be true in order to be valuable: false theories could further our understanding too. For theories can be wrong in fruitful ways. By noticing a mistake, for example, we might be led closer to the true theory. But even if being true is not strictly speaking necessary for a theory to be valuable then, should we not at least say that *contributing* to finding the true theory is necessary for a theory to be valuable? In other words: should we not qualify the principle and say that for a theory to be valuable for our understanding of justice, it either has to be true or help us in our search for the true theory? A false theory that does not contribute to our search would be valueless then.⁴

The assumption underlying this proposal is that an increase in the understanding of *x* always means moving closer to the true theory of *x*. Estlund might deny this. He might argue that our understanding of *x* improves simply by coming to realize that some theory of *x* is false, and this does not imply that we are now any closer to the true theory. If there are infinitely many possible theories of *x*, for example, then by noticing the falsehood of one of them, I have not necessarily come any closer to the true one—even if I can now eliminate

⁴ Estlund's own as well as this slightly qualified version of his proposal imply that whether or not a false theory is valuable is something we can only determine in retrospect: while true theories always further our understanding, whether or not some false theory will further our understanding of some subject matter is not knowable before it has actually done so.

one option, I still have infinitely many others to consider. So my set of possible theories has not become any smaller.

However, I am not sure whether there could be infinitely many possible theories about any x . Of course, there could be infinite amounts of gibberish about x . But for something to count as a possible theory of x it must be more than gibberish: it must pass a minimum threshold of plausibility and accord with at least some of our intuitions—it must be something that really *could* be the correct theory, in other words. So it cannot be too far off the mark, but must contain at least some core truths about x , even if not the whole truth (by ‘core truth’ I mean a truth that concerns the essence of x , rather than just some random truth about x).⁵ And assuming that the number of core truths about x is finite, it follows that the set of possible (and sufficiently distinct) theories about x is also limited.⁶ This, in turn, means that once we have eliminated a possible theory as false, we have moved closer to the true one. So then, the above assumption is justified after all.

4. Why Is Understanding Something Important Valuable?

Finally, I want to think some more about Estlund’s suggestion that the non-practical value of a true theory of justice is that it helps us understand something important. I believe that focusing on the value of understanding is a fruitful direction to take when thinking about the non-practical value of theorizing, and I agree with all steps of the argument: I agree that understanding something important is valuable, I agree that justice is important (and that practicalists have to agree justice is important, either intrinsically or instrumentally—either would be compatible with Estlund’s account)⁷ and so I also agree with the conclusion.

However, I wonder *why* understanding something important is valuable. Can we say anything more about that than simply ‘it just is’? We might find an answer in Plato’s *Republic*. At several points, Socrates says that understanding important things such as justice and goodness allows us to ‘own’ ourselves, to be identified with our own thoughts and actions.⁸ The philosopher soul is the happiest, according to him, because even in horrible external circumstances it

⁵ For a discussion on the distinction between essential and ‘random’, i.e. non-essential (though possibly still necessary) truths about some x , see Fine 1994 and Robertson 2008.

⁶ I say ‘sufficiently distinct’ in order to rule out the possibility that changing one relatively unimportant aspect of a theory already generates a new one. And this seems plausible enough: competing theories of x have to disagree about essential aspects of x , rather than about some non-essential detail about x (if two theories only differ with regard to some such detail, we should not speak of different theories but at most of qualifications of the same theory, if that). Hence, if the essential truths about x are limited, so is the number of possible theories about x .

⁷ I thank David Estlund for pointing this out to me.

⁸ Cf. Plato, *Politeia*. See, for example, Book I (351e9–352a9: the unjust, whose mark is a lack of wisdom, are not at one with themselves, but experience inner conflicts that make them unable to decide on and pursue a particular path of action), Book IV (443c10–444b9: the just, whose mark is wisdom, are in control of and at one with themselves, unlike the unjust, meaning, the ignorant) or Book IX (588e3–591a5: the wise are self-governed; they understand

finds freedom within itself: it knows the most important truths, so it cannot be enslaved in the sense of being deceived or led astray from the good, not even by itself and its own desires.

This could be a starting point. We value the understanding of certain things so highly because it gives us freedom or rather, autonomy in the mind. It enables us to think for ourselves, to judge for ourselves, to decide for ourselves. But if *that* is the value of understanding important things, then is not some form of practicalism correct after all? For according to this proposal, understanding important things would be valuable because of the *practical* consequences it would have for individual persons (it would make them autonomous).

Of course, this is not the kind of practicalism Estlund discusses: Estlund is talking about political practicalism, meaning the position that political theory has to be *politically* practical in order to be valuable; and individual autonomy is not necessarily politically relevant. But still, if the politically non-practical value of a theory consisted in its contribution to personal autonomy, then its value would still be practical in this broader sense. (Seeing as every theory that furthers our understanding of important things could potentially contribute to personal autonomy, however, this broader form of practicalism would not exclude any of these theories from the realm of value.) So if we find some plausibility in the autonomy-idea, then we might conclude that political theories, while they do not have to be politically practical in order to be valuable, yet have to be practical for individual agents in the way outlined.

Bibliography

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what is truly good and are capable of directing their actions towards the fulfillment of their own (and everyone else's) real desires).