The Best and the Rest

Thinking With Ideals in a Non-Ideal World

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Abstract

Models of ideal societies pervade the history of political thought from ancient times to the present. How can these models contribute to our thinking about political life in our non-ideal world? Not, as many political theorists have hoped, by performing a normative function — by giving us reasons to accept particular political principles for the purpose of regulating our thought and behavior. Even still, idealistic models can sharpen our thinking about politics by performing a conceptual function — by helping us clarify and interpret the concepts we use to describe and evaluate political behavior and institutions. These insights point to a more incisive and judicious approach to political inquiry, in which explanatory and normative modes of thought are tightly intertwined.

Prefatory Notes

- An earlier version of this manuscript was the focus of a one-day workshop at Australian National University and a six-week reading group at UC San Diego. I am grateful to the participants for their comments and criticisms, which prompted several important revisions.
- I still need to add and/or check references to the existing literature in places, many of which I have flagged with the marking (*CITATIONS*).
- I wish to acknowledge that the main title comes from David Estlund: he circulated a predecessor of his article "Just and Juster" (Estlund, 2016) under the title "The Best and the Rest".

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CHAPTER 1

Ideals in Political Theory
What to Expect in this Book

Imagine you have enrolled in an introductory political theory course. This week's lecture is focusing on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's thoughts about legitimate political authority in *On the Social Contract*.[1] You learn that, for Rousseau, the exercise of political authority is legitimate only if it is consistent with individuals' freedom; or, as Rousseau puts it, political authority is legitimate only if it "defends and protects with all common forces the person and goods of each associate," while "each one. . . nevertheless obeys only himself and remains as free as before" (SC i.6). The demand to leave each member of society "as free as before" seems especially obscure. The professor directs your attention to Rousseau's notions of "civil liberty" and "moral liberty" (SC i.8), explaining that a legitimate authority is one that acts on the basis of civil laws that express the will of each member of society.

But this solution raises a question, one that is obvious once we appreciate the need to establish political authority in the first place. As you learned in previous lectures, the need for political authority arises because people disagree, often sharply, about matters of common concern — for example, how material resources should be distributed among members of the group, how tasks associated with cooperative endeavors should be assigned, and so on (SC ii.1). It is easy enough for you to see how the enactment and enforcement of civil laws can

[1] Rousseau 2019. I cite Rousseau's text using lower case Roman numerals to designate the book and Arabic numerals to designate the chapter.

settle these disagreements but, given divergent interests and opinions, it seems that such a solution must endorse the interests of some members of the group at the expense of others'. How, then, can a society be constituted by laws that *each* member of a group can see as expressing his or her *own* will? The professor directs your attention to Rousseau's notion of a "general will," summarizing it thus: The general will expresses a conception of the common good to which each member subscribes when they reflect on their society from the perspective of an impartial citizen (as opposed to the perspective of their particular interests as a private individual) (SC ii.1, 3–4). When civil laws reflect this shared conception of the common good, then each member of the group can see them as expressing his or her own will *as a citizen*. When members of the group obey civil laws that reflect their shared conception of the common good, then each one will obey laws "one has prescribed for oneself" (SC i.8). Thus, a society constituted by laws that reflect a shared conception of the common good is one in which political authority resolves disagreements in a manner consistent with the full freedom of each citizen.

While you now feel like you grasp the meaning of Rousseau's principle of legitimate authority, it still seems quite abstract. What would a society that realizes this principle look like? In particular, how might a group of individuals with conflicting interests identify a shared conception of the common good? *How, if at all, might this principle apply to our present political context?* To answer these questions, the professor turns to the institutions Rousseau says would realize his principle in practice. According to Rousseau, the general will on any issue is identified by taking a vote within an assembly of all citizens. But not just any voting procedure will work — he has something specific in mind. To begin with, the issue under consideration by the citizen assembly must be general in its content and scope, abstracting from any particular case involving particular individuals (SC ii.6). Second, since the general will is the will of the entire citizen body, *all* citizens must be present at the vote (SC iii.15). Third, citizens must make up their own minds about how to vote and must not vote as members of political parties (SC ii.3). Fourth, and crucially, citizens' votes must reflect their opinions about whether the legislation under consideration advances the common good, not their opinions about whether the legislation advances their private interests as individuals (SC iv.1–2; cf. ii.3). Roughly speaking, the general will is identified with the outcome of majority rule voting under these conditions.

Once we have identified the general will, you wonder, how does a society ensure that it is implemented? An assembly of the entire citizen body may be able to identify the general will but it cannot effectively implement the general will (SC iii.1, 4). How do we make sure that a government comprising some but not all citizens implements laws in accordance with the general will instead of

advancing their own interests? The professor calls time on the class, promising to take up these questions in a future lecture.

As you walk away, trying to tie all these threads together, you can't help but wonder: *How do Rousseau's ideas help us think about legitimate political authority here and now, in our present day political context?* The political society he describes seems so at odds with apparently realistic expectations for political behavior and institutions: regular meetings of the entire citizenry to make legislative decisions; citizens who set aside their interests as private individuals when voting on legislation; a political process devoid of parties or other special interest groups; laws that reflect a shared conception of the common good despite individuals' divergent interests and opinions; a government that faithfully implements the legislative decisions of its citizens. Such a society seems so idealistic. Is Rousseau's vision of political society merely a utopian fantasy? *What should we make of Rousseau's ideal?*

Anyone familiar with Rousseau's ideas will recognize this line of questioning. Anyone familiar with the discipline of political theory will recognize these questions as invoking a recurring theme. Throughout history, political thinkers have used stylized descriptions of political societies to address questions about politics. Often enough, these models of society appear *idealistic* in that they depict modes of social and political organization that seem incompatible with what we, based on our observations, have come to regard as typical human behavior. If we aim to think clearly about politics in the real world, what, if anything, can we take away from the idealistic models of society we find littering the history of political thought?

The issue I am pointing to is more general than this question suggests, for political theorists are not the only ones who think with idealistic models of society. Some social scientists do so as well. A classic example is economists' analysis of models of perfectly competitive markets to establish propositions about the relationship between market transactions and economic efficiency. Political activists often appeal to idealistic models too. A recent example is Black Lives Matter activists' appeals to visions of a society without police forces and prisons to muster public support for abolishing these institutions. More generally, then: *What should we make of the idealistic models that pervade our social and political thought?*

People tend to answer this question in one of two apparently opposing ways. *Supporters* think idealistic models are a natural, and perhaps necessary, element of social and political thought. They have a strong intuition that we cannot think clearly about how we should organize social and political life without any sense of which arrangements would be best. This is not (yet) to say that models of ideal societies are straightforward guides for thinking about which social and politi-

cal arrangements we should implement; real-world conditions complicate their application to real-world arrangements. But supporters insist that our thinking about real-world politics is nonetheless enhanced by studying models of ideal societies. Some think that such models can expand our sense of what is possible — by depicting forms of social and political organization not yet considered, or by showing how some latent modes of human behavior could become manifest by altering prevailing incentive schemes. Some think that idealistic models serve some kind of normative purpose — for example, by depicting a target for our efforts to reform existing practical institutions and practices, or by setting a benchmark against which to evaluate feasible institutions and practices. And some think that ideals serve to clarify the meaning of normative terms such as "justice," or to expose our reasons for ascribing certain meanings to these terms.

Skeptics dismiss idealistic models as an unproductive and perhaps pernicious diversion. While they agree with supporters that our reflections on real-world social and political arrangements should be informed by a sense of how things could be otherwise, they think our attention should be limited to practicable possibilities. Some argue that ideal societies are too far removed from the real world to help us think about what is possible or about what we should do; some argue that models of ideal societies muddle and mislead our thinking about what we should do or about the meaning of normative terms because they obscure too many important features of the real world. Skeptics thus conclude that we should dispense with idealistic models because they distort rather than clarify our reflections on real-world social and political arrangements.

Should we support the use of idealistic models in our thinking about real-world social and political arrangements? Or should we follow skeptics in dismissing them as useless or worse? I will show why supporters and skeptics both get something right. Putting things quite roughly for now, I will show why we should follow skeptics in dismissing idealistic models as useless for thinking about *normative* matters — for prescribing goals for practical political action, for providing standards for distinguishing rightful social and political arrangements from wrongful arrangements, or for providing general principles for evaluating a broad array of possible arrangements. I will also show that we should support the use of idealistic models for thinking about *conceptual* matters — in particular, for interpreting and operationalizing the conceptual content of normative terms such as "freedom," "equality," "community," which we often use to describe and evaluate social and political arrangements.

In a moment, I will give a preliminary sketch of the ideas I will use to articulate these claims and show why we should accept them. But let me first say something about what is at stake. While idealistic models of society are a recurring feature of political thought — Rousseau's is just one example among many — skepticism is

the prevailing sentiment. At least in the Anglo-American world and perhaps more broadly, the dominant mode of practical political inquiry within academic and policy circles displays a near-exclusive focus on quantitative data and statistical analyses in search of the causal effects of political behavior and institutions. This is typically combined with skeptical impatience with "speculative" political thought — basically, any mode of inquiry that is judged to stray too far from "the facts," with "the facts" roughly corresponding to the universe of observations that can be quantified and analyzed using an ever-expanding set of statistical techniques. Unsurprisingly, then, we often find thinkers who investigate idealistic models relegated to the margins of academic political science and (to a somewhat lesser extent) public political discourse. While we should be skeptical about the value of idealistic models for some purposes — that's one of my claims in this book — the prevailing skeptical impatience naively dismisses idealistic models as useless for *any and all purposes*. By showing how idealistic models can be useful for thinking about conceptual matters, I will show, against this naive skepticism, why they play an integral role in scientific political inquiry and public political discourse. We cannot credibly assess any scientific hypothesis or public pronouncement unless we understand the conceptual content of the terms used to express their component ideas. So, put simply, attending to conceptual matters is essential to fruitful scientific inquiry and public discourse. I will show how idealistic models (such as Rousseau's) can be useful tools for exploring, interpreting, and testing candidate answers to questions about the conceptual content of the terms we use to express our ideas about politics. In so doing, I will show how investigating idealistic models can play an integral role in scientific political inquiry and public political discourse.

To ward off naive skepticism, however, we must concede skepticism where it is warranted. So we must check unwarranted confidence in the value of idealistic political thought. Political theorists have vigorously pushed back against their marginalization within the discipline of political science, often highlighting their contributions to important conceptual and normative issues.[2] To defend the relevance of idealistic political thought in particular, political theorists have overwhelmingly focused on demonstrating its value for our thinking about the kinds of policies or institutions we should adopt to address the myriad injustices we find in the real world. But, on this point, political theorists have claimed too much. While much skepticism about using idealistic models as a basis for recommending real-world interventions is vague and impressionistic, I will show it is nonetheless warranted. Some political theorists, perhaps sensing that this

[2] See, among others, Grant 2002; Saxonhouse 2004; Shapiro 2002; Smith 2000; Warren 1989; Wolin 1969.

skepticism is warranted, have suggested that idealistic political thought is instead useful for clarifying and refining our understanding of the conceptual content of our normative terms. Yet these replies are vaguely expressed; accordingly, they do not clearly and concretely distinguish the (warranted) use of idealistic models to think about conceptual matters from the (unwarranted) use of idealistic models as a basis for normative recommendations. While suggestive, they are insufficient to check unwarranted confidence and, in turn, insufficient to ward off naive skepticism. What we need is a defense of the thought that idealistic models are useful for thinking about conceptual matters that allows us to clearly and definitely see how we can separate two apparently inseparable ideas: how, on one hand, using idealistic models to address conceptual questions contributes to our thinking about real-world politics without, on the other hand, providing a basis for recommending interventions to address real-world injustices. I aim to present such a defense in this book.

At this point, some might express impatience with the kind of abstract methodological inquiry I have just sketched. One motivation for such impatience might be the thought that political theorists should avoid thinking about how to think about politics and just get on with thinking about politics. Or perhaps it is the thought that methodological insights are best achieved by simply doing political theory rather than by abstract reflection on the practice of political theory. I confess sympathy with these thoughts and, so, with the impatience with abstract methodological reflections they might provoke. I agree that simply doing political theory is usually the best source of helpful methodological insights, and that methodological reflections undertaken for their own sake are liable to lapse into academic naval-gazing, leading to "solutions in search of a problem." Nonetheless, I think there is value in systematizing the methodological insights we gain from doing political theory. Methodological reflection concerns the proper application of the tools and techniques one uses for articulating and solving problems. Regardless of discipline, we are all more effective thinkers when we use the methods at our disposal with a nuanced understanding of their strengths and limitations.

Systematic methodological reflection can also help to check both unwarranted skepticism and unwarranted confidence about the nature and value of political theorists' contributions to political inquiry. Political theorists are liable to misrepresent the nature and value of their contributions if they misunderstand the strengths and limitations of the tools at their disposal. This kind of misrepresentation is on full display when it comes to idealistic political thought, and I suspect it is at least partly responsible for recurring skepticism about the relevance of much normative political theory for broader political discourse. As we will see in later chapters, political theorists by and large defend idealistic

political thought by arguing that we need it to guide our thinking about how to improve upon the status quo. But it is very hard for many people to see how political thought that appears divorced from reality can guide real-world action. Political theorists' initial answers to this skepticism have some face plausibility, but they often appear strained under scrutiny. Perhaps these answers can ultimately withstand this scrutiny but I suspect that the final product will be a series of *ad hoc* adjustments that are too unwieldy to hold together in a coherent whole. This imposes a significant cost: if the ideas motivating skepticism about the value of idealistic political thought come together in a way that appears simpler and more natural than political theorists' best defenses, then many people will remain persuaded that idealistic models contribute little to our thinking about politics, even if much of this skepticism is unwarranted.

I aim to present a coherent framework to think about the value of idealistic models, which can help us better understand their strengths and limitations as tools for thinking about politics. This view, in turn, allows political theorists to more clearly understand how their idealistic models contribute to scientific political inquiry and public political discourse. This comes with a substantial payoff: theorists can confidently declare that idealistic models make integral contributions to political inquiry and discourse without having to evade or defeat — indeed, while accepting — many of the skeptical intuitions that motivate resistance to idealistic political thought. What's at stake, then, is an understanding of the value and purpose of idealistic models that allows us to navigate between naive skepticism and naive optimism about the value of idealistic political thought.

1.1 Three central ideas

I want to establish both a skeptical claim — that idealistic political thought is useless for normative purposes — and a supportive claim — that idealistic political thought can be useful for conceptual purposes. My efforts to establish these claims and show how we can hold them together in a coherent and nuanced view about the value of idealistic political thought revolve around three central ideas: a focus on the uses of idealistic *models* rather than idealistic *theories*; a characterization of the differences between the potential *normative* functions of models and their potential *conceptual* functions; and an account of the comparative reasoning people use to identify a particular situation as ideal. I give a preliminary sketch of these ideas here to prepare the way for more detailed discussions in later chapters. But let me first give a more precise (yet still preliminary) statement of the two claims I aim to establish to help motivate these ideas and reveal their

utility for accomplishing my objective.

Suppose our thinking about some practical political matter is guided by a particular normative principle, yet we acknowledge that our thinking could have been guided by different principles, which diverge in their practical implications. Suppose we face the task of explaining why we accept one principle over the others for the purpose of guiding our thought.

The Skeptical Claim. Idealistic models of society do not supply reasons to accept any particular principle as normatively authoritative.[3]

The Supportive Claim. Idealistic models of society can help us interpret and operationalize the conceptual content of candidate principles; this, in turn, helps us think more clearly about our reasons for accepting a particular principle.

Let's return to Rousseau to make these claims less abstract. Rousseau presents us with a principle of political legitimacy — *A political society should be based on laws that each citizen can see as reflecting a shared vision of the common good* — and a model of a society that instantiates this principle. The *Skeptical Claim* implies that, even if we agree that it depicts an ideal society, Rousseau's model does not supply any reason to accept his principle as authoritative for our normative thinking about politics. The *Supportive Claim* implies that Rousseau's model can, however, interpret and operationalize the conceptual content of his principle. To wit, what is meant by "a shared vision of the common good"? Rousseau's model interprets this abstract idea by operationalizing it within a determinate institutional context. Consider a highly intuitive interpretation of this idea, which roots the notion of a shared vision of the common good in individuals' private and partial interests. This interpretation suggests that a shared vision of the common good can emerge only insofar as there exists a way to satisfy individuals' particular interests; this, in turn, suggests that a shared vision of the common good is possible only if individuals' particular interests do not diverge to the point of conflict. Rousseau's model, in contrast, offers a way interpret the idea of a shared vision of the common good that can reconcile this notion with widely divergent individual interests: namely, by showing how a shared vision of the

[3] For reasons that will become clear later, it would be more accurate to call this the *Skeptical Conjecture*. In effect, I will show that political theorists bear a substantial burden of proof to show that a more precise version of this *Skeptical Claim* is false; moreover, I will show that they cannot discharge this burden while adhering to the standard practices of normative political theory (although that is not to say they have no way to discharge it). I conclude from this point that we should accept the *Skeptical Claim* as a basic methodological assumption — we should treat it as if it is true. I will take care to observe this complication in later chapters but set it aside for my purposes in this introduction.

common good can be rooted in individuals' shared commitment to making political decisions from the perspective of an impartial citizen despite their divergent private interests. This thought is still quite abstract. But Rousseau's model helps to make it more concrete by presenting a (hypothetical) society that embodies the kind of decision making procedure invoked by the proposed interpretation.

The *Skeptical* and *Supportive Claims* above indicate two ideas that will be fundamental for my discussion. First, they draw our attention to the potential uses of *idealistic models of society* as opposed to *idealistic political theories*, or what political theorists typically call "ideal theories." Second, holding these two theses together requires us to distinguish between two potential functions of models: that of *supplying reasons for accepting a principle as normatively authoritative*, and that of *interpreting and operationalizing the conceptual content of a principle*. My argument for the *Skeptical Claim* will require me to introduce a third fundamental idea: namely, that theorists use a distinctly *comparative mode of reasoning* to identify particular models as ideal. I will show how this comparative mode of reasoning ultimately prevents us from designating any particular model as an ideal in a principled way; this, in turn, prevents us from taking idealistic models as a basis for justifying our acceptance of particular normative principles. I now sketch these three ideas in order.

The first step toward establishing and reconciling the *Skeptical* and *Supportive Claims* is to adopt a distinctive perspective on the question of idealistic political thought. Recent academic debate has predominantly cast the question as being about the value of so-called "ideal theory." Participants in this debate typically neglect to clearly distinguish ideal *theories* from ideal *models*. Roughly put for now, an *ideal theory* is a set of normative principles, which characterize the normatively significant features of a social situation that qualifies as ideal in some respect (for example, as ideally just or ideally democratic).[4] An *ideal model* is a simplified description of social and political arrangements (formal institutions, informal practices, and so on) and the patterns of human behavior we expect to be associated with these arrangements, which, taken as a package, is judged to be ideal in some respect. These two notions are, no doubt, deeply related. People often think of an ideal theory as a set of principles that are specified by analyzing a model of an ideal model. Less obviously, we might simply use the principles that constitute an ideal theory to describe an ideal model, so that our construction of an ideal model consists in little more than enumerating a set of normative principles ("Imagine a society that satisfies principles P, Q, and

[4] Scholars offer several definitions of "ideal theory," not all of which are mutually consistent. I address these differences in the next chapter.

R...”). So it is unsurprising that existing discussions have tended to run these two concepts together. Yet models and theories are importantly different kinds of things; most immediately, theories are more abstract than models because numerous distinct models can realize the same theory. So, in our thinking about the value of idealistic thought, we should clearly distinguish these two concepts and focus on the former. I briefly describe one reason for doing so here, leaving a more extensive discussion to chapter 2.

Principles can perform some normative function — for example, they can be used to characterize a goal for political reforms or to comparatively evaluate feasible reform options — independent of, and even in spite of, their connection to an ideal model. Even if, as a matter of discovery, we specify a set of principles by analyzing the normatively significant features of an ideal model, we might nonetheless be justified in accepting those same principles as guides for real-world political action for reasons that make no reference to their provenance: for instance, we might have independent reasons to believe that implementing them is likely to mitigate certain injustices or bring about otherwise desirable outcomes.

The distinctive methodological issue raised by questions about the value of *ideal* theory (as opposed to normative theory more generally) is whether a set of principles can perform some normative function *in virtue of the fact that* or *because* it characterizes the normatively significant features of (a model of) an ideal society. Consider two ways of articulating the question about the value of ideal theory, one more specific than the other. The less specific question is, “Do we have reasons to use ideal principles to perform some normative function?” More specifically, however, we might ask, “Does the fact that a set of principles characterizes the normatively significant features of an ideal society give us reasons to use those principles to perform some normative function?” The less specific question can be answered while bracketing the fact that the principles in question characterize an ideal society, attending solely to their more general status as normative principles. Thus, the less specific question allows us to evade (unwittingly or not) the distinctive methodological issues raised by questions about the value of ideal theory. The more specific question, in contrast, forces us to confront these issues directly because it cannot be answered without attending to the fact that the principles in question purport to characterize an ideal society. Because ideal models are simplified descriptions of ideal societies — specifically, their political institutions, social practices, and associated behavioral patterns — shifting our focus from ideal theories to ideal models keeps the more specific question in the forefront of our minds. With the concept of an ideal model in hand, the more specific question can be helpfully transposed: “Can our analysis of the normatively significant features of an ideal model supply reasons to justify our

acceptance, for the purpose of guiding our normative thought, a set of principles that characterizes these features?" This is the question I want us to focus on.

A second step toward seeing how the *Skeptical* and *Supportive Claims* can both be right is to clearly distinguish between different functions models might perform with respect to our normative thought. Those who support the usefulness of idealistic political thought converge on the intuition that it can help us "clarify our values."[5] In debates about ideal theory, this thought is typically interpreted as implying that ideal theories help us see more clearly which attributes or properties we have reasons to realize in and through our social and political actions and arrangements. It is a short step from this thought to the thought that ideal theories perform a *normative function*—that reflecting on the features of ideal societies can supply reasons to believe that we should aim to realize those same features in the real world, or to believe that we should use those features to distinguish between just and unjust institutions, or to believe that we should compare and evaluate possible social and political situations by measuring the extent to which they realize the features of the ideal. All that is required to take this short step is to accept the highly intuitive thought that we want our normative thinking about real-world politics to reflect our values. Framing things in this way imposes a significant burden of proof on skeptics: to deny that idealistic political thought can perform a normative function, one must either deny this highly intuitive thought or deny the widely-held thought that idealistic political thought can clarify our values. Most opt to deny the latter because the burden of doing so is lighter than the burden of denying the thought that our normative thinking should reflect our values. Even still, denying that idealistic political thought can clarify our values is an uphill climb and, even if supporters judge skeptical arguments on this point to be sound, a strong intuition that idealistic political thought can clarify our values may persist. The end result is a stalemate.

We can avoid a stalemate by exposing a second interpretation of the intuition that idealistic political thought can help us "clarify our values": namely, that it can help to interpret and operationalize the meaning or conceptual content of the terms we use to express our values—terms such as "freedom," "equality," "well-being," and "justice." This interpretation opens up a position that is foreclosed by the first interpretation: one can now follow skeptics in accepting that idealistic political thought cannot perform a normative function, yet also show that it can perform the stated conceptual function, which substantiates the strong intuition that idealistic political thought can "clarify our values."

To keep the possibility of this mixed position clearly in view, I will distinguish between two functions of idealistic models. I will say that an idealistic model

[5] This is a close paraphrase, rather than a direct quote, of Stemplowska and Swift (2012, 386).

performs a normative function (also: serves a normative purpose) if and only if, and to the extent that, it supplies a reason to accept a principle as normatively authoritative, by which I mean: we are justified in accepting a principle as properly regulating our thought and behavior because it characterizes normatively significant features of the ideal model. I will say that an idealistic model *performs a conceptual function* (also: serves a conceptual purpose) if and only if, and to the extent that, it helps to interpret and operationalize the conceptual content of the terms we use to articulate principles (which, in turn, are candidates for normative use).

To help see this distinction more clearly, let me set it within a general picture of normative thinking. Suppose we want to think systematically about the kinds of political institutions we should establish. To do so, we will want to organize and guide our thinking using normative principles: principles that prescribe normatively appropriate goals for political action; principles that distinguish just or legitimate arrangements from unjust or illegitimate arrangements; principles that enable us to comparatively rank different possible arrangements. When we turn our attention to the task of justifying our acceptance of particular principles for these purposes, we recognize a wide range of candidate principles, which can diverge in their implications for what we should do or what we should think. Hence, if we are to consider ourselves justified in accepting certain principles as authoritative — if we are to see them as giving us reasons to act in certain ways or to hold certain beliefs and attitudes — we must show that we have good reasons for accepting these particular principles over competing candidates. While there are numerous ways to justify our acceptance of normative principles, one might think idealistic models are especially helpful with this task: by showing that some set of principles characterizes the normatively significant features of an ideal model, we might think that we have exposed a reason to accept those principles as authoritative for some normative purpose. If idealistic models help in this way, then they perform a normative function in my sense of that phrase. (The *Skeptical Claim* above says that idealistic models do not help in this way.)

Idealistic models might help us reflect on our reasons for accepting certain principles in a different way, namely, by clarifying, interpreting, and operationalizing their conceptual content. A better understanding of a principle's conceptual content does not, on its own, supply reasons to accept it. But conceptual clarity can help us better assess the implications of applying different candidate principles to particular social situations; this, in turn, can help us more effectively assess our reasons for accepting some principles over others. If idealistic models help to interpret and operationalize the conceptual content of candidate principles, then they perform a conceptual function in my sense of that phrase. (The *Supportive Claim* above says that idealistic models can help in this way.)

Once we see how idealistic models can help at these two distinct places in our normative thinking, it is open to us to follow skeptics in denying that idealistic models can perform a normative function while vindicating the supportive intuition that they can nonetheless "clarify our values" in a way that sharpens our normative thinking.

A third step toward establishing the *Skeptical Claim* in particular (which also constrains my efforts to establish the *Supportive Claim*) is to develop a general account of the kind of reasoning people use to support their claims that a particular model of society qualifies as ideal. Most discussions of the value of ideal theory ask in general how ideal theories can contribute to our normative thinking while setting aside the differences between the particular ideal theories on offer. This seems to be a natural starting point: the history of political thought is littered with ideal theories and we, political theorists, are often familiar enough with the arguments theorists present to support their acceptance. There seems to be no point in examining the reasoning particular theorists use to establish their particular ideal theories; this is already well-trod terrain and, in any case, if we focus on the specifics of these arguments, there are nearly as many answers as there are ideal theories. Given that our aim is to say something general about how (if at all) theories of this kind can inform our normative thinking, it seems best to set aside the complications that come from considering how particular theorists argue for their particular ideal theories — which only distract from the general point — and simply assume, for the purposes of the argument, that we already have an ideal theory in hand. How theorists argue for their ideal theories is relevant for deciding which ideal theory we should accept, but not for discerning what we can do with an ideal theory once we accept it.

This way of framing the issue neglects the possibility that the functions an ideal theory can perform *in virtue of the fact that it characterizes the features of an ideal model* depend on how one comes to designate a particular model of society as ideal — or whether one can even justifiably designate a particular model as ideal in the first place. We cannot examine this possibility unless we attend to theorists' approach to designating a particular model of society as ideal. And we cannot say something general on this issue unless we develop a general account of theorists' approach to designating a particular model as ideal. In chapter 4, I develop such an account, which I call the *comparative approach*. The basic idea is that theorists designate a particular model as ideal by identifying a collection of models that are treated as candidates for being designated ideal, comparing these candidate models with respect to certain normative criteria, and designating as ideal the model that is judged "best" with respect to these criteria. According to this comparative approach, a theorist designates a particular model as ideal if they judge that it depicts a "best-case scenario" (in their chosen sense of "best")

in comparison with other candidate model scenarios.[6] In developing a general account of this comparative approach, I show how, despite their manifest and important differences, particular theorists' arguments for designating particular models as ideal share certain structural features — among them, a set of candidate models and a set of normative criteria for evaluating these candidates — which are brought together and deployed in accordance with a common (and familiar) mode of comparative reasoning.

I intend for my account of the comparative approach to capture shared features of the actual practices of political theorists. Accordingly, I have developed it by reflecting on the logical structure of numerous arguments presented by particular theorists. In chapter 3, I introduce the examples of Plato, Thomas Hobbes, and John Rawls to forge links between the general account and actual practice and to illustrate some central features of the comparative approach. But I could have chosen any number of other examples: Aristotle, Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Marx; or Robert Nozick, Ronald Dworkin, G.A. Cohen, and, more recently, Hélène Landemore, and Danielle Allen.[7] My reflections on the arguments of actual theorists have certainly been informed by a theoretical intuition that some form of comparative reasoning is best suited for designating a particular model as ideal. But this intuition originated, at least in part, in my early efforts to make sense of how particular arguments are supposed to work, and it has been strengthened by subsequent efforts to test it against a wide range of particular arguments. So my account of the comparative approach is the result of an iterative process, going from my reconstructions of particular arguments to a general account and then back again in search of a view that both makes sense of the reasoning theorists actually use to justify their claims that a particular model of society is ideal and also presents an independently plausible account of the kind of reasoning that could justify such claims.

1.2 Two central arguments

I have outlined three ideas that frame and inform my inquiry: a focus on the uses of idealistic models rather than ideal theories; a clear distinction between the potential normative functions of models and their potential conceptual functions; and an account of the comparative reasoning theorists use to designate

[6] I present a similar "optimization approach" in Wiens 2015*a*, 2017, 2018. There is an important difference between what I am doing in this book and what I was doing in my earlier work. There, I argued that theorists use comparative reasoning to pick out a candidate *theory* as ideal. Here, I am arguing, more narrowly, that theorists use comparative reasoning to pick out a candidate *model* as ideal, leaving it open whether theorists use an ideal model to pick out an ideal theory.

[7] Nozick (1974); Dworkin (2000); Cohen (2009); Landemore (2020); Allen (2023).

a particular model as ideal. Let me now preview how I will bring these ideas together to show why we should accept both the *Skeptical* and *Supportive Claims* above.

I have alluded to academic debates about the value or purpose of idealistic political thought. Discussions on this topic during the past twenty (or so) years have overwhelmingly focused on determining whether ideal theories — sets of principles, which are meant to characterize the normatively significant features of an ideal society — can perform some kind of normative function, largely neglecting the possibility that ideal theories might perform a non-normative function.[8] In this vein, supporters have distinguished between three types of normative function ideal theories might perform. First, ideal theories might perform a *prescriptive* function, which is to say: the principles that constitute an ideal theory characterize the features of a society that we should take practical steps to realize, although perhaps only approximately.[9] Second, ideal theories might perform a *judicial* function: the principles that constitute an ideal theory provide a standard of right by which we judge, from a specified normative perspective (e.g., justice or legitimacy), the propriety or acceptability of institutional arrangements, social practices, or patterns of behavior.[10] Third, ideal theories might perform an *evaluative* function: the principles that constitute an ideal theory tell us which possibilities are better than others, thereby enabling us to comparatively rank some set of social and political possibilities.[11]

Skeptics have presented a wide range of arguments to deny that ideal theories can perform any of these three functions. I will survey these debates in more detail in later chapters. At this point, I simply note that, whatever their differences, existing skeptical arguments do one of two things: either they argue that we cannot validly infer conclusions about the principles we should accept for prescriptive/judicial/evaluative purposes from claims about the normatively significant features of an ideal society; or they argue that saying anything credible about the normatively significant features of an ideal society is beyond our epistemic reach. From here, some skeptics draw a sweeping conclusion: ideal theory is, without qualification, useless. This is too quick, for two reasons to which I have already alluded and which I will explain in more detail in chapter 2.

[8] Notable (partial) exceptions include: Estlund 2020; Ismael 2016; McKean 2017; see also Johnson 2014.

[9] Examples include: Berg 2019; Buchanan 2004; Gilabert 2012, 2017; North 2017; Rawls 1999*b*,*c*; Robeyns 2008, 2012; Shelby 2016; Simmons 2010; Táíwò 2023.

[10] Examples include: Adams Forthcoming; Cohen 2008; Estlund 2020; Mason 2004; Rawls 1999*c*; Stemplowska 2008.

[11] Examples include: Boot 2012; Estlund 2016; Erman and Möller 2022; García Gibson 2016; Gilabert 2012; Hamlin and Stemplowska 2012; North 2017; Sangiovanni 2008*b*; Swift 2008.

First, an ideal *theory* might still be useful even if we cannot justify our acceptance of any particular theory by appeal to an ideal *model*. Second, even if idealistic models are useless for one of the *normative* purposes listed above, they might nonetheless be useful for some other kind of purpose. We can guard against hasty skeptical conclusions by distinguishing ideal theories from ideal models and by distinguishing normative functions from other potential functions.

At its most basic, my argument for the *Skeptical Claim* shows that we have good reasons to doubt that we, political theorists, can justify claims about which particular model of society is ideal and, thus, about which normatively significant features would be realized by an ideal society. This is similar to claims made by some other skeptics. For example, David Schmidtz argues that there are no possibilities that stand out from the others as ideal, while Gerald Gaus argues that accurately depicting the normatively significant features of a "far-off" ideal society is beyond our cognitive ability.[12] Unlike these arguments, I do not deny the existence of ideal societies, nor do I question our ability to describe and evaluate societies that are quite unlike those we observe in the real world. Instead, I will (in chapters 5 and 6) show that, due to certain features of the comparative approach, the reasoning we use to designate a particular model society as ideal is liable to be *indeterminate* in the sense that the reasons we marshal in favor of designating a particular model as ideal are highly likely to be compatible with designating at least two competing models as ideal. Once we see this point, it follows that our designation of a particular model as ideal is liable to be *arbitrary* in the sense that this designation is not uniquely supported by our reasoning.

To make these points concrete, let X and Y be labels for two models and assume X and Y depict societies that differ substantially in their normatively significant features. Suppose we present an argument to support the claim that X is ideal. I will show why we should expect this same argument to be compatible with the claim that Y is ideal. When our reasoning is consistent with designating both X and Y as ideal, our reasoning is indeterminate in the relevant sense. In cases where our reasoning is indeterminate, if we designate X as ideal to the exclusion of Y, then our conclusion is arbitrary in the relevant sense. Importantly, I will show that our reasoning about which model is ideal can be indeterminate without us being aware that it is so, so our designation of a particular model as ideal can be arbitrary without us being aware that it is so. My point will be that the likelihood of indeterminacy is high enough, and the burden of proof required to show otherwise is substantial enough, that we should treat claims that designate a particular model as ideal as if they are arbitrary. We should, in turn,

[12] Schmidtz 2011, 774; Gaus 2016, 78. On the latter point, also Barrett 2020; Gaus and Hankins 2017; Nili 2018; cf. Rosenberg 2016.

avoid placing weight on claims about the normatively significant features of ideal models when deciding which principles to accept for some normative purpose. Hence, the *Skeptical Claim*: *idealistic models do not give us reasons to accept any particular normative principle as authoritative* because our designation of a particular candidate model as ideal is liable to be arbitrary.

Unlike existing skeptical arguments, I do not argue that we cannot be justified in using idealistic *theories* to guide our normative thinking in real-world contexts. As I noted above, I allow that we may be justified in using principles that characterize an idealistic society for prescriptive or judicial or evaluative purposes. What I argue instead is that we cannot justify our acceptance of such principles for some normative purpose by showing that they characterize the normatively significant features of an ideal society. If we are justified in using idealistic principles for normative purposes, this justification must come from elsewhere — for example, by showing that implementing such principles will effectively improve upon the status quo.

So idealistic models are useless for justifying our acceptance of particular principles for some normative purpose. We might nonetheless use them to sharpen our normative thinking in important ways. Some supporters of ideal theory argue that it can be useful for clarifying the conceptual content of normative terms, "justice" in particular.[13] In a similar vein, I will show how idealistic models can be useful for interpreting and operationalizing the concepts we use to articulate normative principles. This thought is not entirely new; I take it from philosophers of social science and others who argue that the function of formal models in social science is to interpret and operationalize abstract concepts.[14] Given my argument for the *Skeptical Claim*, however, I must show something more precise: namely, how idealistic models can perform this conceptual function without also supplying reasons to accept any particular principle. My argument, which I present in chapter 8, consists in presenting examples that make clear how idealistic models can do the one without also doing the other. Going even further beyond what others have already said, I use these examples to show more specifically how, by interpreting the conceptual content of normative principles, idealistic models can facilitate careful thinking about normatively acceptable trade-offs among the disparate criteria we might use to comparatively assess a wide range of possible social and political arrangements. My thought is that, by presenting concrete "embodiments in thought" of scenarios that realize a range of normative criteria, idealistic models allow us to conceptualize several

[13] Erman and Möller 2022; Estlund 2020; Ismael 2016; Johnson 2014; McKean 2017; Thakkar 2018.

[14] See, for example, Cartwright 1999, chap. 2; Hausman 1992, chap. 5; Johnson 2021; Rubinstein 2012.

normative criteria (e..g, freedom, equality, security, community) *in connection with each other* and thereby enable us to explore in a concrete setting where these criteria might be congruent and where they might conflict. The insights we gain from this exercise can give us a more nuanced sense of the source and tractability of conflicts among these criteria, which, in turn, facilitates careful thinking about trade-offs among them.

According to my *Supportive Claim*, idealistic models can perform a useful conceptual function. But some ideal theory skeptics will argue that we *should not* so use them, even if we can. By abstracting from normatively significant features of real-world politics — deep moral and political disagreement, various forms of injustice — idealistic models interpret and operationalize our normative concepts in ways that are liable to mislead and distort our thinking about politics.[15] I use this skeptical challenge, in chapter 9, to qualify and thereby sharpen the *Supportive Claim*. We should treat idealistic models as interpreting and operationalizing conceptual *proposals*, candidates to supply the meaning of our normative terms; they do not, in virtue of being idealistic, give us any reasons to accept the proposals they embody and it is left to us to determine whether we should adopt any particular proposal as conceptually authoritative.[16] Beyond this, there are limits on the conceptual insights we can glean from idealistic models. There are concepts we need to articulate our normative ideas, such as *discrimination* and *oppression*, for which idealistic models are conceptually useless. Further, even for those concepts for which they supply useful conceptual insights, their use should be combined with non-ideal models, which can both sharpen the contours of the conceptual hypotheses embodied by idealistic models and operationalize the scope conditions for their application in non-ideal circumstances. Nonetheless, idealistic models perform a distinctive conceptual function in virtue of being idealistic: by abstracting from various impediments and threats to the realization of normative criteria, such as *freedom* and *equality*, idealistic models clearly display concrete conditions that constitute the full realization of these criteria (according to the proposed interpretation embodied by the model). In the end, I show that, as tools for interpreting and operationalizing the conceptual content of our normative terms, idealistic models are *insufficient yet indispensable* for developing a fully adequate conceptual framework.

[15] See, for example, Anderson 2010, 3–7; Geuss 2008; Mills 2005; Schwartzman 2006, chap. 2; Sleat 2016; Williams 2005.

[16] See Queloz (2022) on the "authority problem" in conceptual engineering.

1.3 Same tools, different tasks

I have just sketched the narrative thread that runs through the foreground of the book, which focuses narrowly on the question of what we can and cannot do with idealistic models and culminates in the *Skeptical* and *Supportive Claims*. There is a second, overlapping narrative thread, which mostly runs in the background and comes to the fore in chapters 7 through 9. This one is more broadly about the potential for theoretical progress that is latent within the comparative approach, but which can only be unlocked once we see its limitations. The comparative approach brings together two broader theoretical practices: that of comparatively evaluating models of society, and that of analyzing the normatively significant features of these models. My argument for the *Skeptical Claim* shows how, by combining these practices for the purpose of designating a particular model as ideal, political theorists have muddled them in ways that mislead our normative thinking.

Rather than renounce these practices, however, we should re-mix them — we should pry them apart and re-direct them to different ends. In so doing, we can expose neglected means for making progress on a task that has largely eluded political theorists — namely, that of thinking systematically about how to trade off disparate normative criteria. In chapter 7, I will show how we can extend the practice of comparatively evaluating models of social situations and re-direct it away from its current purpose — that of designating a particular model as ideal — and toward another — that of sharpening our thinking about the relative significance of disparate normative criteria across a wide range of circumstances. In chapter 8, I will show how we can re-direct the practice of analyzing the normatively significant features of idealistic models away from its current purpose — that of justifying our acceptance of particular normative principles — and toward another — that of interpreting and operationalizing the conceptual content of our normative criteria so as to reveal points of congruence and conflict among them, which in turn, sharpens our thinking about normative trade-offs. Instead of putting both practices together to accomplish a single task — identifying an ideal model — we should use them separately to accomplish two complementary tasks — interpreting our normative criteria and estimating their relative significance — the results of which can then be combined to construct an evaluative standard that systematizes our thinking about how to trade-off normative criteria across a wide range of circumstances.

So idealistic models can be a valuable tool for normative political theorists, just not for performing the normative functions proclaimed by ideal theory supporters. But idealistic models are not only valuable for normative inquiry; they are integral for *social scientific inquiry* too. Many of the central questions

in social science focus on identifying and explaining the empirical and causal relationships that obtain between abstract normative criteria: Which forms of organizing political power are most effective for fostering mutually beneficial cooperation? Do economic and political regimes that protect individual freedoms of various kinds promote greater general welfare, and if so, how? Is social equality necessary to sustain democracy, and if so, which forms and why? We cannot sensibly investigate these questions without specifying the conceptual content of key terms: "political power," "mutually beneficial cooperation," "individual freedom," "social equality," "democracy," and so on. Idealistic models can — and should — play a role in this task.

Social scientists, of course, acknowledge the need to define their terms, as evidenced by lively debates about how to measure concepts such as *democracy*, *freedom*, and *well-being*.[17] These debates seem to get on just fine despite giving little more than a token nod to classic ideals. Some would even say they are better for it — scientific progress requires us to define our objects of study in precise and objective terms, and idealistic models are too "subjective" and stray too far from reality to be useful for this purpose. For example, Antonio Cheibub and colleagues define "democracy" in terms of competitive elections on the grounds that it can be operationalized by "clear and stark" coding rules, which eschew "subjectivity" by referring wholly to observable features of regimes, thus delivering an "easily reproducible" measure; they reject measures based on "substantive conceptions of democracy" because these "are not amenable to the empirical investigation" of various links between democracy and other things we might care about, such as political accountability or economic equality.[18]

Trouble lurks here. Social scientists study the relationships between different forms of political organization and outcomes such as cooperation, equality, freedom, and welfare because these are things we generally care about — intuitively, these are things we think we have reasons to value and, thus, reasons to realize. Yet, if political scientific research is to enrich broader conversations — both public and academic — about these matters of normative concern, then social scientists must define their terms in a way that is continuous with the topic of these conversations.[19]

My thought here — which I present in more detail in chapter 9 — goes beyond the generic thought that political scientists should pay attention to the meaning of the normative ideals they invoke in their work.[20] An example will help

[17] (*CITATIONS*)

[18] Cheibub, Gandhi and Vreeland 2010, pp. 71–72.

[19] I adopt the idea of "topic continuity" from Cappelen 2018. My discussion of this point, now and later, draws on work done together with Sean Ingham.

[20] For example: "What do those 'ideals' that we speak so confidently about — for example,

to see why. Imagine we are participating in a conversation about our reasons to value democracy, in which we are tallying the various potential advantages and disadvantages of living in a democratic society. Suppose, for illustrative purposes, that we are using the term "democracy" to pick out the classical notion of *collective self-government*.[21] Our conversation thus aims at a shared understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of living in a society in which citizens as a collective have the kind of influence over political decisions required for the classical notion to apply. Suppose now that a social scientist enters the conversation and challenges one of the propositions we have accepted — say, that democratic governance hinders economic growth — by appealing to empirical studies that seem inconsistent with that proposition. If, for the purposes of these studies, "democracy" is defined as a regime in which political leaders are selected by competitive elections, then it is not immediately clear that we should concede the challenge. Whether we should depends on whether the two notions — *democracy as competitive elections* and *democracy as collective self-government* — correspond to the same topic of conversation. This will fail to be so if — as seems plausible[22] — the set of regimes in which citizens select their political leaders through competitive elections diverges significantly from the set of regimes in which citizens exercise the kind of influence over political decisions that constitutes *collective self-government*. In such a case, the political scientists' empirical studies may contribute to a particular scholarly conversation about the value of *democracy as competitive elections*, but they will fail to contribute to *our* conversation about the value of *democracy as collective self-government*.

We can now glimpse how idealistic models can play a role in social scientific inquiry. Suppose, for the purposes of our conversations about our reasons to value democracy (or equality, or freedom), we — the members of some academic or political community — define "democracy" by appeal to an idealistic model of democracy — that is, we agree that the thing about which we intend to inquire is concretely embodied by an idealistic model of democracy. Then the topic of our conversation is (partly) constituted by this idealistic model. If social scientists want to contribute to our conversation, then they must show why their scientific studies of democracy are relevant to the topic of conversation as constituted by this model. Thus, so long as social scientists aim to contribute to our conversations, they must define their terms with reference to the relevant idealistic models.

Existing arguments for ideal theory obscure the preceding thought. By in-

democracy, equality, non-discrimination, efficiency — mean? And how important are they (relative to each other and to other normative goals)?" (Gerring and Yesnowitz, 2006, 108).

[21] See, among others, Dunn 2004; Lane 2016; Ober 2017; Tuck 2016.

[22] See, e.g., Levitsky and Way 2010, p. 1.

sisting that the primary purpose of idealistic political thought is normative, ideal theory supporters encourage us to think about the relationship between normative theory and social scientific inquiry in terms of a fairly stark division of labor: normative theorists identify the principles we should use to guide our thinking about which objectives we should pursue, while social scientists assess the feasibility of various possibilities and identify institutional mechanisms and social practices that can help us effectively implement our chosen goals.[23] Some may think this division of labor can deflect skeptical objections to idealistic political theory: "Our job as political theorists is to set long-term normative goals, which should not be constrained by current social and political realities. And we need not concern ourselves with feasibility or implementation issues because that's the business of social science." Ironically, however, this division of labor only bolsters skepticism: if the purpose of normative theory is to identify objectives that are plausibly practicable, and if idealistic normative theory is thought to fail in this regard because it strays too far from reality, then it seems we must reject idealistic thought as useless.[24] Impatience ensues: insofar as political theorists persist in putting forward idealistic models, they fail to uphold their responsibility in the disciplinary division of labor.

My arguments encourage us to think differently about the relationship between theorists' idealistic models and social scientific inquiry. First, by showing that idealistic models do not function to justify our acceptance of normative principles to guide practical political action, my argument for the *Skeptical Claim* challenges the thought that idealistic political theory can perform its assigned task within the simple division of labor model. Second, by showing how idealistic models can help to interpret and operationalize the conceptual content of abstract normative criteria, my argument for the *Supportive Claim* indicates how idealistic models can contribute to social scientific inquiry.

1.4 What not to expect

There are two types of book about method. One is like assembly instructions for do-it-yourself furniture: it specifies a task, outlines the steps required to complete the task, and prescribes tools to be used at each of the steps. The other is like an owners's manual for a tool: it specifies the features of the tool, describes its basic functions with reference to core tasks, and registers important warnings against

[23] See Swift and White's (2008) statement of this "division of labor" model. Gerring and Yesnowitz (2006); Shapiro (2002); Warren (1989) (among others) observe the practice of dividing labor in this way to criticize it.

[24] Compare Valentini's (2009, 333) statement of "the paradox of ideal theory."

misuse. This book is an instance of the second type: it specifies the features of idealistic models and the process by which theorists designate them as ideal; it describes their conceptual function with respect to various normative and social scientific tasks; and it warns against their misuse in pursuit of certain normative purposes.

Not being the first type of book, there are several things I will not discuss, although you might initially expect me to discuss them. First, because I discuss how certain practices in political theory can be useful for thinking about normative trade-offs and, in turn, constructing a standard for comparatively evaluating social possibilities, you might expect me to present a comprehensive account of how to carry out this task. But I will do no such thing because this book is about how certain tools can contribute to this task and not, more generally, a complete accounting of what this task involves.

Second, because I argue that idealistic models can be useful for interpreting and operationalizing certain concepts that figure prominently in normative and social scientific inquiry, you might expect me to develop a more or less comprehensive account of what is involved in ascribing conceptual content to normative and social scientific terms. There is a large and growing philosophical literature on "conceptual engineering," in addition to a vast psychology literature on concept acquisition and the role of concepts in human reasoning.[25] Since this is not a book about how to carry out the task of ascribing conceptual content to normative and social scientific terms, I avoid these literatures except as they might intersect with questions about the uses and misuses of idealistic models.

Third, because I discuss the role of idealistic models in political theory, you might expect me to present a comprehensive account of how we should do political theory as a means to identifying the place of idealistic models within it. Many discussions about the value or purpose of idealistic political thought are shaped by comprehensive views about how to do political theory — whether political theory should be "realistic" or "moralistic"; whether it should be "ideal" or "non-ideal"; whether it should be "practice-dependent" or "practice-independent"; whether and how elements from competing positions should be combined; and so on.[26] I avoid these debates except as they intersect with questions about the uses and misuses of idealistic models. In particular, my argument for the *Skeptical Claim* is unlike most existing skeptical arguments, which start from the premise that normative political theory should be "realistic" or "non-ideal" and then go on to show that certain forms of idealistic thought play no useful

[25] For an introduction to the relevant literature in philosophy, see Burgess, Cappelen and Plunkett 2020. For an introduction to the relevant literature in psychology, see Murphy 2002.

[26] For surveys of the relevant issues, see Erman and Möller 2015; Rossi and Sleat 2014; Stemplowska and Swift 2012; Valentini 2012.

role in their picture of what normative theory should be like.[27] I start, instead, from an account of the process by which idealistic models are designated as ideals and show how this account implies that idealistic models are useless for performing certain normative functions. Although my skeptical argument does not rely on any comprehensive account of normative political theory, it does imply a constraint on any such account: normative theorists should not appeal to the features of idealistic models as reasons to accept any particular principles as authoritative for some normative purpose. Yet it is beyond the scope of my inquiry to say anything constructive about how political theorists should go about justifying our acceptance of certain principles without appealing to idealistic models. I neither presuppose nor defend any such view, as this is not a book about how theorists should pursue that particular task.

Ideal theory supporters might enter at this point to make a final plea for ideal theory. The basic idea is straightforward. For all my skepticism about the use of idealistic models for normative purposes, there remain several tasks pertaining to the justification of certain normative principles — the task of justifying principles for prescribing the goals we should pursue through practical action, that of justifying principles for comparatively evaluating social possibilities, and so on. While my *Skeptical Claim* rules out the use of ideal models for pursuing these tasks, it leaves untouched several approaches to these tasks that do not require us to appeal to ideal models. Thus, my skeptical argument leaves untouched several approaches to normative political theory that we might group together under the heading of "ideal theory."

I develop and consider this thought in more detail in chapter 9 but I can be brief here. Our discussions about methodology — insofar as we should have them at all — should focus on well-defined tasks and tools.[28] The term "ideal theory" refers to a motley crew including both tasks and tools — distinct tasks requiring different steps and tools, and distinct tools with different functions.[29] Organizing our methodological discussions around some abstract category labelled "ideal theory" is thus liable to confuse more than clarify. In the interest of clear thinking about how we should pursue certain tasks and which tools can be helpful for these tasks, we should abandon "ideal theory".[30]

[27] My earlier arguments against what I called the "ideal guidance approach" (Wiens, 2012, 2015*a*,*b*, 2023) proceeded in this way.

[28] Floyd (2022) makes this point, although I don't endorse his call to create a research program centered on "*methodology* in political philosophy" (130, original emphasis). Blau 2017; Leopold and Stears 2008 are two recent texts on method that emphasize (more or less) well-defined tasks and tools.

[29] See the different ways of characterizing "ideal theory" in recent surveys: Hamlin and Stemplowska 2012; Stemplowska and Swift 2012; Thompson 2020; Valentini 2012.

[30] Compare Orr and Johnson 2018.

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