

The Best and the Rest

Chapter Summaries

David Wiens

1. *Idealistic Political Thought: What to Expect in this Book* (approx. 18 pages). This chapter introduces and motivates the topic: What can we learn from political theorists' models of ideal societies? I start by showing how the topic is relevant to broader questions about the role of normative political theory in academic political science and public political discourse, and explaining how my discussion helps us navigate between skeptical and enthusiastic extremes. I also introduce the book's two central claims, the *Skeptical Conjecture*, which says that we should deny that idealistic models can perform a normative function, and the *Supportive Claim*, which says that idealistic models can perform a conceptual function. I provide an overview of the arguments for these claims, highlighting their theoretical innovations and tracing the broader narrative arcs within which they are located. I end this chapter by describing my approach to the topic and explaining how my inquiry relates to existing debates.
2. *Idealistic Political Thought: Forms and Functions* (approx. 19 pages). This chapter introduces two central distinctions to frame my inquiry and define its scope. First, I distinguish idealistic principles from idealistic models and motivate my focus on the latter. Second, I distinguish the normative function of models from their conceptual function. I also define my use of the term "ideal" in relation to existing uses of that term and address potential concerns about my usage. I close with a short appendix, in which I survey of existing debates about the value and purpose of "ideal theory" and highlight how their sprawl inhibits theoretical progress.
3. *Ideal Models in Theoretical Practice: Plato, Hobbes, Rawls* (approx. 26 pages). This chapter presents three canonical examples of theorists thinking with ideal models — Plato, Thomas Hobbes, and John Rawls. For each example, I first identify what I take to be their ideal model and characterize its central features. I then reconstruct the reasoning each uses to designate a particular model of society as ideal. The purpose of these examples is to clarify and consolidate the reader's understanding of key concepts (e.g., ideal model) and to ground

the argument of later chapters in existing political theoretical practice.

4. *Ideal Models in Theoretical Practice: A General Approach* (approx. 26 pages). This chapter sketches a general *comparative approach* to identifying model scenarios as ideals. The basic idea is that an ideal model depicts a “best-case scenario”: given a set of models under comparison, an ideal depicts political arrangements that rank highest with respect to the theorist’s chosen evaluative criteria and given their specification of the context in which candidate arrangements are assumed to operate. To draw out key features of this comparative approach, I consider and dismiss two alternatives: an *intuitionistic approach* and an *axiomatic approach*. I end the chapter by addressing potential concerns and explaining certain matters of detail, showing in particular how ideal models can be incorporated into a familiar reflective equilibrium approach to justifying normative principles.
5. *Skepticism About Ideal Models: Inflection Points* (approx. 29 pages + 35 page formal appendix). This chapter provides crucial background for the argument in the next chapter. My purpose is to show that our judgments about ideals are not only contingent on assumptions about context, but that these judgments can be sensitive to extremely small changes in these assumptions. To operationalize this idea, I introduce the concept of an *inflection point*: roughly speaking, an inflection point occurs wherever an extremely small change in context implies a “change of direction” in our judgments about which model is ideal, from identifying one model as ideal to identifying a competing model as ideal. I then show that the logic of the comparative approach implies that inflection points are a prevalent feature of theorists’ reasoning about ideal models. (The text of the chapter is largely informal, but the analysis is based on formal models, which are described in the appendix.)
6. *Skepticism About Ideal Models: Indeterminate and Arbitrary* (approx. 21 pages). This chapter presents my argument for a *Skeptical Conjecture*: We should accept, as a basic methodological assumption, the *Skeptical Claim* that idealistic models do not perform a normative function. I start by surveying existing skeptical challenges to “ideal theory” and explain how these differ from my argument; in particular, I explain that, unlike existing skeptical arguments, mine does not depend on any claims about the infeasibility of ideals, nor about the risks involved in pursuing distant ideals, nor about the ways in which our ideals might be distorted by our epistemic limitations or ideological com-

mitments. Instead, starting from the premise established at the end of the previous chapter, I show why we have strong reasons to believe that theorists' reasoning about ideal models is *indeterminate* in the sense of being consistent with conflicting conclusions about which candidate model is ideal. Given this indeterminacy, we have strong reasons to believe that theorists' designation of a single model as ideal is *arbitrary* in the sense of being unsupported by their reasoning. But a model that is arbitrarily designated as ideal cannot give us reasons to accept any particular principle for some normative purpose; after all, given indeterminacy, our reasoning equally supports acceptance of a conflicting principle. While my argument does not conclusively establish that any ideal model must be arbitrarily identified as such, it shows that theorists face a substantial burden of proof in deflecting this suspicion, a burden which cannot be discharged using standard political theoretical methods.

7. *Constructing Standards: Theorizing Trade-Offs* (approx. 23 pages). This chapter begins the constructive part of the book, in which I show how two central aspects of the comparative approach — in particular, that of comparing model scenarios and that of analyzing the features of a single model — can be separated and re-purposed to pursue an objective that has typically eluded political theorists: that of developing a systematic theory of how to trade off disparate normative criteria across a wide range of circumstances. This chapter focuses on how model comparisons can contribute to this task. I start by explaining the challenge of thinking systematically about normative trade-offs. I then distinguish three interpretations of an idea that appears in existing debates about ideal theory, namely, that ideal theory can “clarify our values” in a way that helps us think about normative trade-offs. (The third interpretation is left aside until the next chapter.) The first of these is straightforward and most prevalent in existing debates: we can use the principles that characterize the features of an ideal model to guide our thinking about normative trade-offs. I show why we should reject this idea. I then show why we should accept a qualified version of the second interpretation, which claims that the process of comparing model scenarios can supply insights that are useful for constructing a more general theory of normative trade-offs. Since ideal theory supporters have put forward a version of this second interpretation, I show why accepting it does not vindicate their claim that ideal theory can perform a normative function.

8. *Constructing Standards: Conceptualizing Criteria* (approx. 27 pages). This chapter turns to the other element of the comparative approach — that of analyzing the features of a single idealistic model — and argues for the *Supportive Claim* that idealistic models can perform a conceptual function by interpreting and operationalizing the conceptual content of the normative criteria we use to describe and evaluate political possibilities. I start by surveying existing debates to uncover similar ideas from ideal theory supporters, which coincide with the third interpretation of the claim that ideal theory can “clarify our values” (which was introduced but left undiscussed in the previous chapter). I show that these extant ideas misleadingly conflate the conceptual function of idealistic models with a normative function, in part because they fail to give us a concrete sense of how idealistic models can be used to conceptual ends. I then survey some literature in philosophy of social science pertaining to the functions of game-theoretic models. This survey gives an intuitive sense of how models can be used to interpret and operationalize abstract concepts. I then build from this literature to show, using the examples of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Rawls, how idealistic models can be used to interpret and operationalize abstract normative concepts and, further, how, in doing so, they can sharpen our normative thinking about trade-offs without also performing the normative function ruled out by the *Skeptical Conjecture* above.
9. *Idealistic Thinking in a Non-Ideal World: Normative Theory* (approx. 17 pages). This chapter discusses the broader significance of my arguments in the previous chapters for normative theory. I use two questions to focus this discussion. The first anticipates an objection from ideal theory skeptics: Perhaps idealistic models can help us interpret abstract normative concepts, but they cannot help us interpret the concepts that are most useful for thinking about political life in a non-ideal world. My reply is that idealistic models are insufficient for developing a fully adequate interpretation of normative concepts, yet they are indispensable for achieving that end. The second question anticipates an objection from ideal theory supporters: Even if we grant the *Skeptical Conjecture*, we still need to figure out which normative principles we should accept to guide our thought and behavior and, so, we still need to do “ideal theory”. While I concede that political theorists should continue to argue for normative principles, I argue that we should drop the label “ideal theory” because it obscures the fact that the various activities we might place under that label do not form a coherent methodological category.

10. *Idealistic Thinking in a Non-Ideal World: Social Science* (approx. 15 pages).
This chapter discusses the significance of idealistic models beyond our thinking about normative matters: How, if at all, can theorists' idealistic models contribute to the explanatory aims of political science? I show how, by attending to the conceptual function of idealistic models, we can see something that is obscured by focusing on their putative normative function: namely, that political theorists can and should contribute to the development of social scientific measures for concepts such as *democracy*, *equality*, *freedom*, and so on.
11. *Epilogue: Toward an Integrative View of Political Inquiry* (approx. 2 pages).
I summarize the broader significance of my arguments by showing how they point to a unifying approach to political inquiry, in which explanatory and normative modes of thought are tightly intertwined, which in turn produces more incisive and judicious thinking about politics.