

Critical Dialogue

The Practical Turn in Political Theory. By Eva Erman and Niklas Möller. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2018. 178p. \$85.00 cloth, \$22.50 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592719003591

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In *The Practical Turn in Political Theory*, Eva Erman and Niklas Möller seek to defend what they call “mainstream liberal theory” against the charge that it engages in “armchair theorizing and therefore is too detached from reality to guide political action and have any practical import” (p. 3). As they note, the criticism arises from “disparate quarters”: they focus on complaints leveled by non-ideal theorists, practice-dependence theorists, political realists, and pragmatist political and epistemological theorists (p. 1). But many others—including postcolonial theorists, feminists and queer theorists, critical race theorists, and many historians of political thought—have also inveighed against what they regard as the shortcomings and distortions of mainstream liberalism, or what I call “ideal moral theory” in my book, *Injustice: Political Theory for the Real World*. Erman and Möller thus join a roiling controversy within contemporary political theory.

The book is concise and tightly argued, drawing heavily on the authors’ previously published work, and it offers numerous valuable insights into the timely and important topics it addresses. But it fails, perhaps inevitably, to deliver the resolution and progress to which they aspire. Erman and Möller seek a “philosophically rigorous” answer to the question of “how practices may condition normative principles,” hoping to “bring the field forward without an ideological superstructure” (p. 7). Yet it is precisely to ideal moral theory’s problematic notion of “philosophical rigor” and to the ideological character of that approach itself that many of the aforementioned critics, myself included, object.

The book cannot deliver on its broader aims because its argument is reductionist in two related senses. First, in seeking a common denominator among the critics they categorize as “practice-based theorists,” Erman and Möller miss or mischaracterize the distinctive claims of some of the critics they consider, the realists in particular. Second, by reducing the important challenges raised by these critics to a series of analytic questions about the substantive and

methodological constraints that practices place on the theorization and justification of normative political principles, the authors miss what is really at issue in this debate—namely, the purported objectivity and neutrality of the style of reasoning on which mainstream liberals engaged in ideal moral theorizing rely.

Although Erman and Möller acknowledge that the practice-based theorists “have different aims. . . and work from different theoretical perspectives,” they nonetheless insist that these theorists “are all concerned with *the same fundamental question*: what is the proper role of social and political practices in the justification of normative political principles?” (p. 15, my emphasis). Rather than engage with each critical approach on its own terms and with attention to the main thrust of its critique, they instead explore this fundamental question through inquiries into four possible ways that practices might constrain the content, justification, and methodology of normative political theory: linguistically (chap. 3), methodologically (chap. 4), epistemologically (chap. 5), and politically (chap. 6). They find that “the conclusions drawn in these debates about how practices constrain principles are either flawed or too strong” (p. 5).

This is the first sense in which the argument is reductionist: the different and sometimes divergent positions and arguments of realists, pragmatists, non-ideal theorists, and practice-dependence theorists get problematically collapsed into a set of propositions regarding “practice-based” theorists. This is particularly problematic in the case of the realists. Erman and Möller recount realists’ disdain for ideal moral theory’s “ethics-first” approach, which they complain “gives priority to morality over politics and regards the political domain as subordinate to the moral domain, mainly as an arena for the application of moral principles” (p. 12). Realists worry, they observe, that the ethics-first approach focuses too much on consensus and becomes depoliticizing; that is, it conceives of the political domain as devoid of real politics (p. 12). Yet somehow, despite accurately reporting these concerns, the authors miss that these are not obviously about how practice constrains principles—and are not really about anything that can meaningfully be construed as a practice. Indeed, few realists would probably accept as a fair or even adequate account of their critique of mainstream liberal theory one that

reduced it to questions about the proper role of social and political practices in justifying normative political principles.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Erman and Möller's replies to realist arguments do not really answer or even engage the realists' fundamental objections. For example, the authors interpret the objection to the priority of morality in politics—as they do each of the objections raised by the critics with whom they engage—as a technical question, one to be resolved through the application of analytical reasoning. This is the second reductionist tendency, as a result of which the authors engage in a style and level of argumentation that often seem inapposite to the critiques they are addressing. Consider their response to the alleged priority of morality in politics. It cannot, they argue, be an epistemological claim because it is possible to understand and gain knowledge about politics without a prior knowledge of morality. It cannot be a conceptual claim, they continue, because there is little to suggest that political concepts presuppose moral ones. It cannot be a temporal or causal claim because such a claim would imply “that morality always comes first and somehow causes politics to occur” (pp. 107–8). “Hence,” the authors conclude, “while it is primarily the alleged falsity of the ethics-first premise that leads realists to reject mainstream (moralist) accounts. . . it is difficult to grasp what the ethics-first premise is supposed to entail on their reading” (p. 108). Thus the realists' fundamental complaint against ideal moral theory is dismissed without ever being substantively engaged.

Likewise, Erman and Möller's reply to the realists' insistence that political principles should be compatible with constitutive features of politics, such as disagreement, simply seems to miss the point: “It seems premature to think that we have established that disagreement is a constitutive feature of politics until we have a convincing account of the impossibility of agreement. For sure, we have not yet witnessed a very large group of people reach full agreement after due deliberation. But this does not establish the impossibility of such an agreement (pp. 109–10).

Again, the problem is that, despite rehearsing the realists' arguments, Erman and Möller never directly engage them, insisting instead on reading them as analytical claims. What the realists primarily object to, however, is the disposition of ideal moral theory to treat political considerations as inferior or subordinate to moral ones—to theorize justice, for example, as first, a question of identifying the correct ideal moral principle, and second, of applying it in non-ideal circumstances.

There is a double irony here. First, the tendency to transmogrify political questions into philosophical (analytical) ones is among the things to which critics object most vociferously in their denunciations of mainstream theorizing. Second, Erman and Möller themselves frequently abjure us to recognize that many of the disputes

between the rival camps are “first-order” or substantive in nature (e.g., pp. 129, 131, 135, 136, 144); yet they repeatedly rely on analytic arguments in addressing the critics, arguments that do more to dismiss than to genuinely engage with the spirit of their objections. I return to this point in a moment.

Erman and Möller suggest throughout the book that, when suitably weakened and modified, the practice-based argument becomes indistinguishable from wide reflective equilibrium (pp. 137–38), which essentially requires “taking the best viable philosophical arguments into consideration” and refraining from or rejecting “implausible premises and arguments” (p. 138). In their view, all the fuss about practice-based theorizing arises from three “overarching misunderstandings”—that is, mistakes—on the part of the critics, which are related to “justificatory direction, ontological and epistemological aspects, and feasibility constraints in normative theorising” (p. 125). With respect to justification, they call it a logical fallacy to think that if practices constrain principles, then it must be “wrong to start out from some moral principle and simply apply it to the practice in question” (p. 24). With respect to ontological and epistemological concerns, they insist that a principle's (ontological) dependence on a practice does not require a theorist to know or carefully interpret the practice (p. 24). With respect to feasibility, they maintain that there should be no categorical constraint on theorizing (p. 25). Once these “misunderstandings” are rectified, it becomes clear that “the theorist has much more leeway in constructing normative political principles” than the critics suggest (p. 5), resulting in a kind of “justificatory freedom” (p. 137) limited only by weak “fitness” and “functional” constraints. The former requires a kind of coherence among arguments, something like wide reflective equilibrium (p. 133). The latter requires that principles be applicable to the practices that they regulate (p. 145).

All of this seems quite ecumenical. Erman and Möller even side with the anti-foundationalists, arguing that “we cannot think of any interesting, and thus substantial, claims in political theory which are not to some extent controversial and whose justification is fully certain” (p. 135). Again, they insist that “the proper level for debating the pros and cons of normative accounts in political theory is on the level of first-order theorizing” and enjoin us, as a matter of principle, to avoid metatheoretical debate and to refrain from calling for pretheoretical “bans” on certain approaches (p. 136).

Again, there is an irony here—perhaps a performative contradiction—in that most of the book could be read as an effort to banish practice-based arguments. That this irony is lost on the authors brings me back to the point about the disposition of ideal moral theory. I doubt that Erman and Möller see any tension or irony because, like most mainstream liberals, they regard the kind of analytic

argument on which they rely as impartial or objective. To them, “the best viable philosophical arguments” are, definitionally, those that have survived the highfalutin’ nit-picking that analytic philosophers often equate with rigor. They miss the spirit of the realist critique because they cannot understand it other than as a set of (inferred) logical propositions to be subjected to analytic scrutiny. Put differently, like most mainstream liberals, they do not see liberalism itself as ideological and thus do not see how the arguments to which they subject their opponent’s criticisms are themselves among the targets of the criticism.

This is why Erman and Möller’s ambition to “bring the field forward without an ideological superstructure” necessarily fails. The analytic liberalism to which they adhere *is* an ideological superstructure, one camouflaged by the ostensible neutrality of “analytic rigor.” Thus, although other liberals might find the arguments here decisive, the critics from disparate quarters will—with considerable justification—feel that their arguments have been deflected or dismissed rather than engaged on their own terms.

Response to Michael Goodhart’s review of *The Practical Turn in Political Theory*

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— Eva Erman and Niklas Möller

In his review of our book, Michael Goodhart raises two main concerns. The first is an accusation of “reductionism” in two (unorthodox) senses. We are reductionist in that we seek a common denominator among critics of mainstream liberal theory by focusing on the different ways in which practices are said to constrain normative principles. By doing so, we allegedly miss some important differences between, for example, political realists and non-ideal theorists. However, we cannot see how any political theorist can avoid reductionism in this sense. Also Goodhart inevitably picks out some aspects in discussing realism in light of the project he pursues.

The second “reductionism” seems to be that we do not substantially deal with the fundamental objections of the realists, because we treat their claims as “analytical,” “technical,” and “philosophical.” By doing so, we “transmogrify political questions into philosophical (analytical) ones” and fail to treat “the spirit of the realist critique.”

It is hard to make sense of this argumentation strategy, which is all too common in the debate. We obviously do not treat realist claims as analytical in the Kantian sense and are rarely technical in the formal sense, so the objection seems to be simply that we engage in philosophical analysis: we look at what we take to be key claims of theorists and analyze whether these claims hold under different interpretations. Rather than speculating about

“the spirit” of the realist critique, as Goodhart suggests, we think that this is what taking realist arguments seriously amounts to. Moreover, it is difficult to see how realists can remain convinced that they are engaged in *something else* than a philosophical argument. We do not transmogrify political questions into philosophical ones: whatever else they may also be, normative political questions *are* philosophical ones. So we are all “reductionist” in this sense.

Goodhart’s second concern is that although we argue that the disputes between mainstream liberal theory and its critics should be held on the substantive, first-order level rather than on the metatheoretical level, our own analysis focuses on the latter. He finds an irony in this, especially because “most of the book could be read as an effort to banish practice-based arguments,” but thinks that this irony would be lost on us since we see our arguments as impartial and objective.

Here Goodhart misreads both the dialectics and the conclusion. The dialectics, crudely put, is that one camp is developing first-order theories while another camp is complaining that these theories are flawed by providing metatheoretical charges about “idealized” ways of theorizing. When we meet these metatheoretical objections, we are of course conducting arguments on a metatheoretical level. Our recommendation to critics is to seek support by first-order argumentation and aim at developing better normative principles. In a very important sense, it is not how a piece of argument *originated*—for example, by oppressed people or middle-aged white men—that is central, but how well it stands up in the space of reasons once it has been formulated. So we are definitely not placing a ban on practice-based reasoning. We merely say that, whatever the methodology, we are all in the same boat when it comes to justification: in arguing for a principle or an account, we give what we take to be the most convincing reasons for it. Naturally, such reasons, be they factual or evaluative, are in turn based on assumptions, and somewhere we hit rock bottom where we say, with Wittgenstein, “this is simply what I do.” But this anti-foundationalist idea of justification is in perfect alignment with the view of mainstream liberal theorists, like Rawls, who do not believe there to be an Archimedean point of reference on which we may rely.

Injustice: Political Theory for the Real World. By Michael Goodhart. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 298p. \$99.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

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The starting point of Michael Goodhart’s engaging and thought-provoking book, *Injustice: Political Theory for the*

Real World, is his dissatisfaction with two influential approaches in current political theory: ideal theory and political realism. In Goodhart's view, proponents of ideal theory try to have their cake and eat it too, by telling us what justice is and requires and at the same time insisting on its neutrality, impartiality, and objectivity. But because their suggested moral principles are tied to substantive moral and political values, they in fact often function ideologically, neglecting the concrete forms of injustice that people struggle with on a daily basis. However, political realism is not an attractive alternative either, according to Goodhart, for even though realists lay stress on the political nature of normative ideas such as democracy and justice, they are not sufficiently radical in their evaluation and critique of society. Departing from these deficiencies, Goodhart chisels out a third way forward for political theory. First, he develops a metatheoretical and methodological approach, a so-called bifocal approach to political theory; second, he presents a democratic account of injustice within this bifocal framework.

The bifocal approach makes the essentially contested status of justice the very subject of theorizing, while at the same time leaving space for substantive normative critique of social arrangements with the aim of promoting social change. It does so by incorporating two lenses to be adopted by the theorist: the "analytical" lens through which the theorist analyzes the core values and workings of ideologies—for example, how they are laden with interests and power—and the "partisan" lens through which the theorist works with a specific substantive normative view *as* ideologist, to formulate critique and recommend political action and reform. A focus on disagreement on the meaning of justice means first and foremost to treat all justice claims as ideological claims; that is, as claims that are inherently tied to evaluative and normative frameworks.

In his role as ideologist, Goodhart then develops a substantive democratic account of injustice from the core principles of freedom and equality for everyone. These two principles, which lie at the heart of modern democratic thinking, together undercut any kind of natural or arbitrary authority and oppressive rule. The account furthermore entails a commitment to a feminist epistemology—that is, the view of knowledge as unavoidably situated—through which the theorist can detect (analytical lens) and condemn (partisan lens) unjust power relations. On the proposed view, democratization aims at eradicating three forms of injustice: domination, oppression, and exploitation.

In the last part of the book, Goodhart discusses the practical implications of his metatheoretical and substantive view, elaborating what political theorists may do to respond to injustice. Among other things, he argues that responsibility for injustice must be reconceptualized as a political rather than a philosophical problem, which

means that solutions must be sought in the counter-hegemonic political struggles over the meaning of injustice.

Is the bifocal approach a new radical methodology in political theory, or is it rather a version of the methodology commonly used in normative theory? Goodhart argues for the former, objecting to the idea that the approach "is really the same as that taken by most ideal theorists, who also regard their arguments as contingent" (p. 129). But for all his insistence, most of Goodhart's substantive explanation of the bifocal approach points to the latter, and we can only agree when he adds that little if anything of the old is lost, because his ideological view "lets theorists account for all the things that ideal moral conceptions of justice are supposed to do (albeit differently)" (p. 127). Indeed, the main upshot of his bifocal framework seems to be pedagogical. Like the 'Smoking kills!' signpost on a packet of cigarettes, it makes explicit something that we all implicitly know, but of which some of us might still need to be reminded: in the case at hand, to avoid overconfidence in our own theoretical position and to remember that values and norms have long served the interests of those in power.

Consider ideal theory's "ur-mistake from which its other problems flow" (p. 115); namely, to deny the essentially contested nature of justice, and furthermore its denial of the ideological character of political accounts (for example, p. 121). Admittedly, to view political accounts as ideological may sound radical. But on Goodhart's technical understanding of the term, this simply means that they are based on a system of values and ideas that explain and justify certain actions and policies (p. 113). And even if ideal theorists do not describe their theories as depending on an essentially contestable set of values and norms, it does not follow that they *deny* that every justificatory account depends on its basic values. On the contrary, we know of no theorist who would deny that the nature of justice is essentially contested, and it strikes us as more or less trivially evident that *any* political account, however thorough in its justification, relies on values and norms. This means that any normative account in political philosophy is ideological in Goodhart's sense.

Consequently, labeling an account ideological does not have any theoretically demanding implications. Still, it may of course serve a pedagogical function: by making explicit that all accounts are ideological in the earlier sense, the connotation of the term may help remind us that the values on which our accounts rely may always be questioned. In his book, Goodhart nicely uses this pedagogical insight to argue (or at least articulate) how those in power have "rigged the system," how under the disguise of objective and universal values they have brought forward values and principles from which they benefit.

Another central aspect of the bifocal approach that Goodhart takes to have substantial traction is that normative claims should be treated as hypothetical rather than categorical imperatives. Treating claims as hypothetical means taking them as applying to agents conditional on their interests and goals, as opposed to norms or principles that apply to agents regardless of their actual motivations, but simply in virtue of their being moral agents. This indeed sounds like a controversial position, one that would be denied by many (ideal) theorists in political theory who take value claims in general, and justice claims in particular, to be inescapable, categorical, or absolute (the exact gloss varies). But Goodhart then continues:

It does so because it recognizes that all justice claims are generated from within ideological systems and are thus contingent upon the concepts and interpretations that inform those systems. *Treating justice claims this way does not mean that they are this way.* The bifocal approach does not depend on its being true that all justice claims are hypothetical imperatives; nor does it depend on all ideologists regarding their justice claims as hypothetical imperatives. It conceptualizes them all as such because doing so provides powerful analytic leverage on and insight into the politics of injustice and shows deep respect for pluralism. (p. 124, our emphasis)

In other words, in actuality the account is neutral as to whether claims are hypothetical or categorical. What matters is that we, as theorists, do not forget that our normative accounts rely on values. With different values follow different accounts. Consequently, treating all justice claims as hypothetical imperatives is what we earlier called a pedagogical point, another way of saying that justice accounts are ideological.

To our surprise, however, things change when the topic of relativism is brought up. “The most frequent and fervent objection to my approach,” Goodhart writes, “is that it invites or embraces a dangerous moral relativism” (p. 128). Given that Goodhart already has explicitly stated that he does not take a stand on the metaethical question about whether value claims are in fact categorical or even about their truth, this comment seems strange. All the more so as he, initially, reasonably answers that “nothing in my approach denies the possibility that some particular ideological perspective might be true in some moral or philosophical sense; it’s just that nothing turns on that question” (p. 128). But then he envisions a critic who would complain that his account fails to provide categorical reasons for everyone to act and replies that such a critique “presumes what *my approach rejects*: that there is a special moral force of which justice claims of some special kind partake—*that political oughts are or somehow can be categorical*” (p. 128, our emphasis). From that point onward, Goodhart seems to have forgotten his previously noncommittal stance about metaethical questions, as well as his defense

against relativism charges, treating his conceptualization of justice-claims-as-hypothetical as a *substantive* metaethical position.

Hence, at this point, the position changes. The initial description combined the insight that all political accounts are ideological/hypothetical with claims about how certain values and their interpretations have served the powerful, to reach plausible pedagogical conclusions about how the theorist should carefully state the grounding values and norms of her account and be humble about the possibility of finding one set of universal principles. But then Goodhart forgets his prior meta-normative neutrality and makes two questionable moves.

First, by suddenly *substantially* endorsing norms as hypothetical imperatives, he unnecessarily invites the threat of relativism into his account. We say unnecessarily, because not only does it make his account dependent on stronger, and thus more controversial, premises but also because nothing that he is interested in hinges on whether norms are hypothetical, which he also points out in several places in the book. Goodhart’s specific critique of competing accounts for not getting the focus and scope of their theories right—such as whether ideal theory is deficient because it has no means to combat injustice—relies for its plausibility merely on substantive arguments, not meta-normative ones.

Second, and more problematic in practice, Goodhart seems to throw the baby out with the bathwater when he treats his account as eschewing justification as such. Discussing his own normative account, he emphasizes that because it treats normativity as hypothetical rather than categorical, it does not “make any attempt to justify [its] values, ideas, and interpretations” (p. 133). Following Richard Rorty, Goodhart understands philosophical justification as “the search for moral grounds or foundations” and philosophical articulation as “the formulation and expression of values, arguments, and critiques” (p. 130), and concludes that the bifocal account relies on the latter. Indeed, the emphasis in his normative account is on articulating rather than reason-giving. But it is one thing to avoid *foundational* normative issues—much like Rawls did in his later writings—and instead develop an account whose success or failure is tied to a premised set of values and norms; it is quite another to eschew justification within that set of values and norms. Even the most empirically informed account of justice or injustice—taking into consideration all situated knowledge that oppressed people experience—must carefully justify the choices made with regard to how to best interpret its core values and their implications. This is particularly evident for values such as freedom and equality for everyone, which largely all contemporary theorists endorse. Without a thorough justification on the entire chain of claims, a normative

theory is bound to be deficient, however reasonable its core premises.

Response to Eva Erman and Niklas Möller's review of *Injustice: Political Theory for the Real World*

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— Michael Goodhart

I am grateful to Eva Erman and Niklas Möller for their thoughtful review and for this chance to revisit what they rightly highlight as the key to my approach: its treatment of justice claims as ideological. They regard my approach as mostly indistinguishable from ideal moral theory (IMT), except insofar as it is radically different and, in that difference, “problematic,” “deficient,” and “threat[ening].”

They see it as nothing new for three related reasons. First, I wrote that my approach lets theorists do all the things IMT does (though differently, p. 127). In citing this statement, Erman and Möller omit that it is a response to proponents of IMT who, as detailed in Part I, hold that “only ideal moral principles of justice can inform critique and guide action” (p. 127)—an objection precisely to the hypothetical normativity, the ideological character, of justice claims. Second, they construe my position that *all justice claims are ideological* as meaning that *all justice claims depend on values for their justification*. This restatement distorts my position, again ignoring that the point in treating justice claims as ideological is to ascribe those values hypothetical, not categorical, normativity. Third, Erman and Möller assert that all theorists treat justice claims as essentially contested. I find that claim astonishing. True, if pressed, many ideal theorists would concede that their accounts of justice might in principle be wrong. That is hardly equivalent to making the actual contestedness of justice claims foundational to one's theorizing, as my approach does.

In effect, Erman and Möller try to domesticate my position to liberalism and to IMT by reading out the

radical implications of treating justice claims as ideological. To support this reading they cite my statement that “treating justice claims [as having hypothetical normativity] does not mean that they are this way” and that my approach does not depend on its being true that they are. I wrote this to try to sidestep the kind of meta-normative debate that Erman and Möller, in their book, suggest we avoid. I do not know if there is some truth out there on which to ground justice claims, and I do not know how to show that there is or isn't. The bifocal approach is designed to theorize for a conflictual and pluralistic world in which theorists cannot and should not assume that there is a truth (or that they, and not others, have it). Thus the stipulation that political oughts have no categorical force is a *realistic* one that enables critique and prescription in a different, epistemically chastened, mode.

What is at stake here? Erman and Möller view my position on hypothetical normativity as “unnecessarily [inviting] the threat of relativism,” when hypothetical normativity is the essence of theorizing justice claims as ideological. Others seem to recognize this: I have been called a “thug,” berated for my “nihilism,” and accused of Trumpian equivalation of good and evil. Tellingly, when I reject the search for moral foundations and justifications and emphasize instead the clear formulation and expression of values, arguments, and critiques from within a self-consciously ideological position, Erman and Möller read me as denying the need for good arguments that link values to choices and action. That is because, for them, it is untoward to acknowledge these foundational issues; they prefer the Rawlsian strategy of simply avoiding them. It is that characteristic avoidance, I argue, that makes IMT distortional, entitling theorists to make unqualified pronouncements about the requirements of justice while denying their ideological character.