

## Chapter 4

### Feasibility and Desirability

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#### **Preliminary**

Political philosophy may be moved either by descriptive interests or by normative concerns (see *Philosophy and Politics*). In the former case, political philosophy aspires at offering a philosophical comprehension of politics, at describing how politics *is*. In the latter case, instead, political philosophy engages in investigations about how politics *ought to be*. Normative political philosophy is indeed interested in determining which principles *ought to* guide individual conduct and how social and political institutions *ought to* be shaped: it is not interested in describing the status quo, but it is concerned with assessing the status quo or with prescribing how the status quo ought to be.

Political philosophy develops principles and models that display a twofold normative function. On the one hand, similar principles and models are to be intended as providing criteria against which the actual – actual practices and arrangements – is to be assessed. As such, they are *evaluative standards*: they are standards specifying the conditions individuals' conduct or social and political arrangements ought to meet in order to qualify as appropriate. On the other hand, the principles and models political philosophy puts forward are to be considered as action-guiding criteria: they provide *prescriptive principles* meant to show which actions individuals ought to perform or which states of affairs they ought to bring about. In both cases, political philosophy is committed to rationally justify its theses by providing the agents it addresses with reasons for recognizing the appropriateness of its proposed principles and models.

What distinguishes normative principles and models is not only their being concerned with the ought-dimension of politics, but also their claiming authoritativeness in orienting the actions and judgements of the addressed individuals. Accordingly, when political philosophy elaborates principles and models intended to show how politics ought to be – how individuals

ought to conduct or how institutions ought to be shaped – it pursues a twofold objective. On the one hand, it claims the correctness and adequacy – that is the desirability – of the proposed principles and models. On the other hand, it aims at moving the addressed individuals either to enact the proposed principles and models or to endorse them for assessing given practices and institutions. To this end, the principles and models political philosophy proposes must be able to be recognized as adequate – as desirable – by the individuals it addresses and, it is also contended, they must be possible to be enacted or lived by, that is, they must be feasible. This explains why, in developing and justifying its principles and models, political philosophy may appeal both to their desirability and to their feasibility.

### **Two Orders of Methodological Criteria**

Desirability and feasibility represent two orders of methodological criteria operating within political theories. In elaborating its principles and models or in justifying them, political philosophy may start from one of the two, it may assign priority to one or the other, and it may combine them in different ways. It is not easy to detect desirability and feasibility criteria in single and concrete cases of political philosophy. Although political theories rely on similar criteria for developing or vindicating their principles and models, they seldom make it explicit their reliance on them. Yet, the effort of exploring political theories in search of desirability and feasibility is worthwhile. Desirability and feasibility are powerful tools for analysing and assessing political theories: they help in clarifying the methodology adopted – for instance, whether it is realist or idealist (see *Realism and Idealism*) – and they are functional for identifying the source of certain shortfalls – by pointing out, say, inconsistencies between the aim pursued and the methodology endorsed. Moreover, when reconstructed in terms of desirability and feasibility, different political theories can be assessed in a comparative fashion.

In order to single out desirability and feasibility criteria in different examples of political philosophy, it is necessary to rely on clear and general definitions of both. The definitions provided in the two following sections are worked out from a meta-theoretical perspective, from

a perspective that takes its distance from the substantive content of political theories, from their specific principles and models, in order to investigate their methodological structure.

### *Desirability*

Desirability is a normative criterion and it represents one of the dimensions along which political philosophy may argue in favour of its theses or justify its claims. In particular, desirability concerns the adequacy of principles and models. It is apparent that different political theories endorse different criteria of desirability: the substantive content of desirability criteria – what political philosophy proposes as desirable – widely varies among different theories. For instance, in the case of Plato's *Republic*, the substantive content of desirability criteria is the ideal city there described, together with its educational system, its class structure, and the organization of its rulers' life. The substantive content of desirability criteria endorsed by John Rawls, instead, coincides with the two principles making up the conception of justice he proposes (see *Justice*). Being highly variable, the substantive content of desirability criteria does not help in defining what desirability is. However, by abstracting from the substantive content of desirability criteria, a meta-theoretical approach allows to investigate the meaning and the implications of normatively asserting that a certain option or a certain state of affairs is desirable.

To begin with, what distinguishes judgements as to the desirability of principles and models is that they qualify as *normative* judgements. In asserting that a certain state of affairs is desirable, political philosophy is not asserting that it is de facto *desired* but, rather, that such a state of affairs *ought to be desired* or that it is *worthy of being desired* (see *Philosophy and Politics*). It is indeed necessary to introduce a distinction between *desirable* intended as 'what is desired', on the one side, and *desirable* conceived as 'what ought to be desired' or 'what is worthy of being desired', on the other. Adopting the former interpretation, a judgement affirming the desirability of a certain state of affairs would simply be a factual judgement reporting that such a state of affairs is actually desired. A factual judgement is neither appropriate nor sufficient in order to account for the normative significance political philosophy

attaches to the principles and models it presents as desirable: it cannot account for their authoritativeness in guiding action or judgement. Mere report of existing facts, indeed, does not enable political philosophy to stress the need of preserving such facts, and mere acknowledgement that a certain states of affairs is actually desired does not enable political philosophy to move individuals to bring that state of affairs about or to maintain it, if it is already in existence. Accordingly, the expression 'x is desirable' is to be interpreted as stating that 'x ought to be desired'. However, to remain on a high level of generality and to accommodate different meta-ethical positions, it is necessary to specify that intending 'x is desirable' as 'x ought to be desired', does not prevent from concluding that what ought to be desired may coincide or be derived from what is actually desired. Rather, interpreting the expression 'x is desirable' as stating that 'x ought to be desired', is meant to emphasize that, in affirming the desirability of its principles and models, political philosophy assigns them with a normative import.

In order for the statement that a certain state of affairs is desirable to have some normative force, in the sense of its being able to guide action and to motivate individuals either to maintain it or to bring it about, that state of affairs must be presented by political philosophy as more desirable than other conceivable or actual states of affairs. On the one hand, if political philosophy qualifies the status quo as desirable, it must vindicate its desirability by showing, for instance, that it conforms to certain criteria or that it is the outcome of a legitimate process. In this case, the status quo is depicted as what ought to be preserved and it ought to be preserved because other possible states of affairs are less desirable or because the enactment of different states of affairs would be imply, for instance, excessive moral costs. On the other hand, to vindicate the desirability of a state of affairs that is different from the status quo, political philosophy must show that such a state of affairs is more desirable than the status quo itself. In this second case, in order for the statement that a certain state of affairs is desirable to be normatively conclusive, that is in order to move individuals to bring about that very state of

affairs, political philosophy must show that it is more desirable, not only with respect to the status quo, but also with respect to other conceivable states of affairs.

The need for political philosophy to vindicate the major desirability of its principles and models with respect to the status quo or to other conceivable principles and models suggests considering desirability not simply as an all-or-nothing category, but also as a gradable dimension. Indeed, it is necessary to distinguish between *absolute* desirability, which defines the minimal requirements for asserting the adequacy of options or of states of affairs, and considerations of *relative* desirability, which allow one to rank options and to draw comparisons among them. Still relying on Plato and Rawls, the desirability of both the ideal city presented in the *Republic* and the two principles of justice envisaged by Rawls is vindicated not only by showing that they meet minimum requirements of adequacy – thus qualifying as absolutely desirable – but also by showing that they are more relatively desirable with respect to other political arrangements – such as democracy in the case of Plato’s ideal city – and other political principles – such as utilitarian principles in the case of Rawls’s conception of justice.

Furthermore, to fully vindicate its desirability judgements, political philosophy must support them by providing appropriate reasons that need to be convincing for the individuals it addresses: what political philosophy can meaningfully propose as desirable is what individuals themselves may recognize as desirable. Yet, in order to avoid the already mentioned fallacy of conflating what ought to be desired with what is de facto desired, it is opportune to add a proviso: what political philosophy can meaningfully propose as desirable is what individuals may recognize as desirable *under appropriate conditions*. Indeed, asking individuals to assess desirability starting from how they empirically are is tantamount to taking for granted that what they actually desire is to be considered as desirable. On the contrary, political philosophy provides individual with appropriate conditions, with an appropriate perspective from which to assess desirability. Such a perspective may be more or less adherent to the one actually endorsed by individuals: it may coincide with the personal and partial standpoint of the agents addressed or with an impartial standpoint. Or, imagining a spectrum that goes from complete partiality to

absolute impartiality, it may locate some point in between the two extremes. The appropriate perspective envisaged by political philosophy may even coincide with actual circumstances, so that individuals are required to assess desirability from their current standpoint. Nonetheless, in this case, political philosophy needs to commit itself to a preliminary normative principle asserting that the appropriate conditions for deliberating about desirability are the actual ones. This is the position usually endorsed by naturalistic theories. Endorsing a different strategy, political philosophy may require one to assess desirability from a counterfactual perspective in which individuals are considered, not as they empirically are, but as they could or should be (see *Counterfactuals*). The state of nature and Rawls's original position – which is a variant of the former – stem out as paradigmatic examples of counterfactual perspectives, of hypothetical situations of choice. It is worth noticing that the degree of objectivity of desirability judgements depends on the kind of perspective they are formulated from: the more the perspective political philosophy proposes is detached from empirical individuals' actual perspective, the higher the degree of objectivity of desirability judgements (see *Objectivity*).

Summarizing, by presenting its principles and models as desirable, political philosophy expresses normative judgements: it claims that its principles and models ought to be desired. Indeed, in normative terms, the desirable is not what is actually desired by some individuals, or even by the majority of individuals; rather, it is what is worthy of being desired. For desirability judgements to possess normative authoritativeness and to be conclusive, they must meet two conditions. First, political philosophy must show the proposed principles and models are more desirable with respect to the status quo and other conceivable principles or models. Second, political philosophy must vindicate its desirability judgements by providing the addressed agents with reasons supporting them and with an appropriate perspective – which may be more or less adherent to their actual one – from which they can properly appreciate and assess the desirability of the proposed principles and models.

*Feasibility*

Feasibility is a further criterion political philosophy may appeal to for developing and justifying its principles and models. Feasibility is the hallmark of what is possible to realize on the practical level. As such, what is feasible distinguishes from what is merely logically possible, from what, not violating the rules of logic, is possible to be conceived. Accordingly, as a methodological criterion, feasibility orients political philosophy to propose principles and models pertaining to the sphere of practical possibilities, to the sphere of what it is possible to practically realize. More precisely, in the domain of political philosophy, feasibility characterizes those principles that are possible to be lived by and those models that are possible to be enacted.

The sphere of what is feasible is not homogeneous. In fact, a distinction is to be drawn between what is feasible given bare physical facts, on the one side, and what is feasible since it is realizable given social and political practices or arrangements, on the other. Moreover, in the domain of political philosophy, the feasibility of principles and models does not depend only on their compatibility with external feasibility constraints, such as physical or social and political facts. Rather, their feasibility is also affected by their compatibility with internal feasibility constraints, which are connected to individuals' attitudes and dispositions. It is also worth stressing that feasibility constraints may be identified either with reference to how practices, institutions and individuals actually and empirically are or referring to how they could be. For instance, in the case of internal feasibility, it is necessary to distinguish between what is feasible since it requires attitudes currently belonging to the motivational set of empirical individuals, on the one hand, and what is feasible since it requires attitudes that empirical individuals do not have here and now, but that are within human reach, on the other. Depending on whether political philosophy relies on feasibility constraints designed with reference to empirical arrangements and motivations or with reference to how they could be, the sphere of the possible, the sphere of feasibility is more or less wide and more or less rigidly conceived. It is usual for realist political theories to select feasibility constraints relying on empirical observation and to consider them as fixed and overwhelming. On the contrary, it is common for

idealist theories to endorse a less rigid understanding of the sphere of the possible: idealist theories work on the very borders of the sphere of possibility and, differently from realist theories, they may require to modify or remove feasibility constraints in order to enlarge such a sphere (see *Realism and Idealism*).

Feasibility may be depicted as a threshold concept that marks the difference between what is and what is not possible to realize on the practical level. Nonetheless, along with this specific conception of feasibility, which can be labelled as *absolute* feasibility, it is necessary to acknowledge a different notion of feasibility, that of *relative* feasibility. References to relative feasibility allow one to rank options relying on the degree of difficulty (or easiness) in bringing them about. Accordingly, relative feasibility is gradable and it is assessed and measured with reference to the status quo: the more an option is adherent to the status quo and the less amount of correction it requires to apply to the status quo itself, the more relatively feasible it is. The distinction between absolute and relative feasibility also suggests distinguishing between two classes of feasibility constraints: that of strong constraints, which set the limits of what is absolutely feasible and which identify what is barely impossible to realize, and that of weak constraints, which render a model more or less relatively feasible. Weak constraints are usually understood as connected to costs: weak constraints are assessed by balancing the costs and benefits of implementing a model and by ascertaining the availability of the necessary means and devices necessary to implement it.

Since feasibility constraints are related both to socio-political practices or arrangements and to individuals' motivations, feasibility considerations force political philosophy to take into account questions concerning both institutional design and individuals' compliance. In the former case, feasibility requires political philosophy to consider whether its principles and models can be institutionalized. Accordingly, political philosophy is asked to describe the institutional form connected to the implementation of its principles and models in order to assess the possibility, the costs, and the consequences of their realization. In the latter case, instead, feasibility requirements urge political philosophy to consider the availability of



appropriate motives individuals can rely on in order to comply with the proposed principles and models and, once enacted, to sustain them over time.

Feasibility is, first of all, a dynamic concept concerning the possibility of enacting certain principles or of bringing about certain state of affairs. Yet, feasibility may require taking into account not only what can be realized but also what, once realized, can endure over time. Therefore, feasibility considerations may ask political philosophy to focus on the stability of the principles and models it proposes. Stability has to do both with institutional design and with individuals' compliance: the institutions resulting from the implementation of certain principles and models should be designed so that they are not self-defeating, so that they are apt to endure over time and to generate consensus or to favour the emergence of motives that lead individuals to support them.

In order to avoid misunderstandings, it is necessary to further distinguish between political feasibility and feasibility intended in normative terms (normative feasibility hereafter). Political feasibility entails two requirements. First, proposals are politically feasible if they can be carried out and implemented immediately, here and now. On the contrary, as Juha Räikkä notices, in the domain of political philosophy, 'it is not justifiable to say that the institutional arrangements endorsed by a theory of justice are not feasible just because they cannot be achieved quickly' (Räikkä 1998: 29). Democracy seemed certainly impracticable four centuries ago and it was, indeed, a politically infeasible option. Yet it was not barely unfeasible, as the following development of political institutions has shown. Second, in order to be politically feasible, political proposals must win the consensus of public opinion and must avoid the opposition of powerful groups. In contrast, still following Räikkä, 'in political theory ... it is not true that suggested institutional arrangements are not feasible just because they are not commonly supported or because there is a small but powerful group that opposes them' (Räikkä 1998: 29). The abolition of slavery, as an instance, was not politically feasible for similar reasons, but it did not represent a completely infeasible proposal and, in fact, it was achieved later on. It seems plausible to conclude that considerations of political feasibility lead to exclude

proposals that are not immediately possible to realize, while considerations of normative feasibility do not urge political philosophy to look for principles and models that entail the possibility of such an immediate realization. The requirements of political feasibility do not apply in the domain of political philosophy. Since political philosophy develops within a general and abstract dimension, it is not bound to take into account properly empirical constraints characterizing a particular society at a given time, constraints that, conversely, represent the bulk of political feasibility's considerations. For instance, differently from political feasibility, normative feasibility does not require taking into account or accommodating specific empirical data, such as real budget constraints or, say, the results of opinions polls.

If it is true that political philosophy remains at a high level of abstraction that allows it to pay no attention to strictly empirical data and to disregard the details of this or that specific context, it is equally true that political philosophy may be contextualistic. That is, political philosophy may focus on a specific context and, accordingly, it may be primarily concerned with proposing principles and models workable given the peculiar features of such a context. Therefore, it may be useful to introduce a distinction between contextual and universal feasibility. Indeed, depending on the attitude it endorses – contextualistic or universalistic – political philosophy faces different feasibility constraints. When it favours a universalistic approach, the constraints political philosophy acknowledges are almost shallow and *sui generis*: universalistic theories are likely to derive feasibility constraints from a certain interpretation of the human condition or from those features considered as characterizing any form of human association. Contextualistic political theories, instead, take into account feasibility constraints that are more specific and, quite obviously, context-related. For instance, contextualistic theories are bound to consider the institutional characteristics of the context they refer to, its level of economic development, or some other distinguishing feature of the context they address.

Concluding, feasibility is a criterion allowing political philosophy to distinguish what is possible to be practically realized from what is not possible to. As illustrated, normative

feasibility is to be kept distinct from political feasibility since they envisage different criteria for assessing the practicality of principles and models and since they focus on different kinds of constraints. Moreover, normative feasibility is a twofold criterion: it encompasses considerations concerning both the absolute and the relative feasibility of the proposed solutions, as defined above. As a methodological criterion, feasibility orients political philosophy to frame its principles and models within the limits of what is practically realizable and, sometimes, of what is stable or can reach stability. Similar limits are identified with reference to feasibility constraints that, as mentioned, may be weak or strong, highly generic or context-related and that are connected to social and political practices or arrangements, on the one hand, and to individuals' motivations and attitudes, on the other.

### **A Complex Relationship**

With the two definitions at hand, it is possible to consider the relationship between desirability and feasibility. Entering such a question enables to let the preliminary definitional difficulties behind and to approach the methodological question concerning the role and the weight that are to be recognized to desirability and feasibility. The latter question is connected to the broader debate concerning the functions and the tasks political philosophy should pursue, as the following section will clarify.

It is plausible – and intuitively convincing – to envisage certain tensions between the requirements of desirability and those of feasibility. Similar tensions are clearly rendered by Thomas Nagel:

Political theory typically has both an ideal and a persuasive function. It presents an ideal of collective life, and it tries to show people one by one that they should want to live under it ... There is a serious question of how they could be realized jointly, and whether they necessarily interfere with one another. An ideal however attractive it may be to contemplate, is utopian if real individuals cannot be motivated to live by it. But a political system that is completely tied down to individual motives may fail to embody any ideal at all. (Nagel 1989: 903–904)

This passage distinguishes two functions political philosophy is expected to carry out: an ideal function, on the one side, and a persuasive function, on the other. The former requires political philosophy to vindicate the desirability of its proposed principles and models without considering whether they are practically realizable or not. The latter, instead, urges political philosophy to propose principles and models that are able to accommodate feasibility constraints – internal feasibility constraints in particular – and that are hence likely to be accepted by the addressed individuals. Nagel correctly points out that whether the two functions can be successfully carried out together or they reciprocally interfere is controversial.

Nagel's observations are also helpful for singling out the shortfalls connected to an excessive reliance of political philosophy on either desirability or feasibility. In particular, if political philosophy focuses only on desirability and it completely disregards feasibility requirements, it tends to be utopian in a negative understanding of the term: it tends to propose principles and models that, although highly desirable, are useless on the practical level since they are not suitable to be endorsed by real individuals. Nonetheless, an excessive reliance on desirability may render political philosophy liable, not only to be unserviceable on the practical level, but also to acquire an improper posture with respect to individuals: political philosophy may be led to completely transcend and disregard individuals' motivations and preferences, and to improperly require them to modify their attitudes and dispositions. This is one of the risks political philosophy runs into by being sensitive only to desirability considerations. This also explains why idealist theories – which assign absolute primacy to desirability – are often charged of displaying a despotic character (see Berlin 1988). Moreover, by dismissing feasibility considerations connected to the institutionalization of its principles and models, political philosophy may fail to grasp the negative or counterproductive consequences its proposals entail or it may fail to perceive conflicts arising among its principles and inconsistencies characterizing its models.

On the contrary, if political philosophy assigns excessive weight to feasibility, it runs the risk of proposing principles and models that remain too adherent to the status quo and it is likely

to foster acceptance of and adaptability to the status quo itself. Indeed, when excessively concerned with feasibility, political philosophy may fail to display any ideal at all, as Nagel says, or it may dismiss desirable solutions just because they are not up to accommodating individuals' given preferences. Taking feasibility constraints – whether connected to practices or to the motivational sets of individuals – as given and overwhelming, prevents political philosophy from appropriately assessing whether they can be modified and from acknowledging that asserting a principle or a model that transcends feasibility constraints may be functional to enlighten possibilities considered as unavailable beforehand.

Political philosophy understands the relationship between desirability and feasibility along different lines depending on whether it conceives desirability and feasibility as dependent or independent dimensions. If desirability and feasibility are thought of as reciprocally dependent, political philosophy usually envisages an inversely proportional relation between them. On a similar account, the more a principle or a model is desirable the less feasible it is and the other way around. Faced with a similar trade-off (see *Trade-off*), political philosophy looks for a satisfactory balancing between the two classes of requirements: it downgrades the claims connected to one dimension for more properly fulfilling the requirements raised by the other one. When it endorses a similar understanding, political philosophy is usually led to downgrade its concerns with desirability in order to meet feasibility requirements. It is worth signalling that downgrading desirability for the sake of feasibility implies that desirable but not, or not sufficiently, feasible principles and models are considered as inappropriate or, more precisely, as unserviceable on the practical level. Yet, that infeasible principles and models are practically unserviceable is debatable.

To begin with, it is possible to state that, although apparently infeasible, ideal principles and models are not pointless from a practical perspective. Indeed, ideal principles and models are to be intended as regulative ideals, as unattainable goals meant to head the direction of action and to constitute standards for assessing and measuring the distance between the actual

and how the actual ought to be. Thus, although patently infeasible, ideal principles and models may perform both a prescriptive function and an evaluative one. Moreover, as famously stated by Kant in *On the Common Saying: That may be Correct in Theory, but It Is of No Use in Practice*:

This maxim ... does the greatest harm when it has to do with something moral ... For here it is a matter of the canon of reason (in the practical), where the worth of practice rests entirely on its conformity with the theory underlying it, and all is lost if the empirical and hence contingent conditions of carrying out the law are made conditions of the law itself, so that a practice calculated with reference to an outcome probable in accordance with *previous* experience is given authority to control a self-sufficient theory. (Kant 1793: 280)

According to Kant, it is irrelevant whether any empirical evidence suggests that principles and models recommended by political philosophy reveal infeasible: no factual considerations, including feasibility considerations, can disconfirm their validity and their desirability. When political philosophy endorses a similar view, which claims both the practical significance and the theoretical validity and desirability of infeasible principles and models, it clearly assigns priority to desirability. Moreover, on a similar reading, desirability is thought of as completely independent from feasibility: the desirability of a given principle is in no way affected by its feasibility. Similar understandings about infeasible principles and about the relation between desirability and feasibility are usually endorsed by idealist political theories (see *Realism and Idealism*).

There is also a different way of conceiving the relationship between desirability and feasibility in case they are seen as independent dimensions: it is possible to envisage a relation of implication between the two. In particular, when it envisages a similar relation, political philosophy maintains that principles and models cannot qualify as desirable unless they are also feasible. Accordingly, desirability implies feasibility. Such an understanding does not involve

any trade-off between desirability and feasibility: the two dimensions remain independent in that, say, an increase in one of the two does not entail a decrease in the other. On a similar account, it is not a matter of balancing desirability and feasibility but of framing desirability within feasibility. This is methodologically achieved, as in the case of realist political theories (see *Realism and Idealism*), by constraining the domain within which political philosophy applies desirability criteria to the domain of what is feasible. This involves the methodological priority of feasibility: political philosophy starts from identifying the set of feasible options and, then, adjudicates among them by applying desirability criteria. It is worth pointing out that, proceeding in like manner, political philosophy does not even consider options that are desirable but infeasible. A similar methodological strategy is motivated by the idea that, in order to play a proper normative and practical function, principles and models must be feasible, must be possible to be enacted or lived by. That is, differently from the one endorsed by idealist approaches, such a methodological strategy rests on the equation between what is feasible and what is practically relevant and meaningful.

### **A Look to Current Debates**

Before concluding, it may be useful to have a quick look at how the distinction between desirability and feasibility helps to clarify questions which are currently debated by political philosophers. As already suggested, investigating political theories with reference to desirability and feasibility allows to uncover and to account for their methodological structure. Moreover, as the previous section has shown, examining how the relationship between desirability and feasibility is conceived enables to understand how different political theories consider the practical function of political philosophy. In particular, by analysing how such a relationship is conceived, it is possible, on the one side, to determine whether a given political theory endorses an idealist or a realist attitude and, on the other side, to enlighten whether or not it deems feasibility as a necessary condition for political philosophy to play a practical function. The ongoing meta-theoretical reflection precisely focuses on the practical function political

philosophy should undertake and it is engaged in determining which methodological strategy allows political philosophy to pursue its specific aims (for example, Stears 2005).

The current meta-theoretical reflection investigates whether political philosophy should endorse a realist attitude or an idealist approach. It is plausible to imagine that, after reading the previous sections, a similar question has a quite familiar ring and that it is easily understood in terms of desirability and feasibility. Nonetheless, it might be opportune to provide some further clues. Realist approaches attach priority to feasibility and they aim at remaining as adherent as possible to how politics is and at proposing principles and models that accommodate factual considerations or the empirical findings of social sciences (Miller 2008). Idealist approaches, instead, ascribe priority to desirability: in the elaboration of their principles and models, they tend to dismiss factual considerations and feasibility constraints (Cohen 2003). Indeed, the question concerning the role and the weight to be attributed to desirability and feasibility also intercepts the current reflection concerning the fact-sensitivity of political philosophy (see *Facts and Principles*). As far as this debate is concerned, the main question regards the role facts should play in the construction and justification of principles and models. From the perspective of the criteria investigated in this chapter, facts constitute feasibility constraints: such constraints are derived, more or less directly, on the basis of factual or empirical consideration. Therefore, it seems plausible to state that, in taking its distance from facts, political philosophy is, at once, downgrading the relevance of feasibility. On the contrary, when political philosophy intends to remain as adherent as possible to facts, it certainly ascribes a prominent role to feasibility and its principles and models are designed with the precise intent of accommodating facts, and feasibility constraints among them. It is also worth signalling that the different classes of feasibility constraints singled out – external/internal, weak/strong, for instance – hint at different sorts of facts. In effect, when addressed from the perspective of feasibility, the question concerning the fact-sensitivity of political philosophy requires to consider not only the degree of adherence of political philosophy to facts: it also requires to take into account which



kind of facts political philosophy deems relevant and, accordingly, which kind of feasibility constraints it aims at accommodating.

Connected to the just mentioned contrapositions between realism and idealism and between fact-sensitivity and fact-insensitivity, stands the question concerning the merits and limits of ideal theory. With respect to this point, the current debate aims at assessing whether political philosophy should work out its principles and models from within an idealized theoretical space, which is fictitiously made rid of elements that would render the realization of the proposed solutions difficult if not impossible, or it should develop its principles and models starting from an as far as possible reliable and verisimilar understanding of actual circumstances. It seems clear that ideal theory better allows political philosophy to focus on desirability: it programmatically spirits away constraints of feasibility, thus enabling political philosophy to develop its desirability criteria without being continuously engaged in adjusting its claims to feasibility requirements. On the contrary, non-ideal theory enables political philosophy to develop principles and models that meet requirements of feasibility: it is precisely intended to acknowledge actual constraints that impede or hinder the realization of normative principles and models. Moreover, it is usually contended by opponents of ideal theory that principles and models developed under idealized conditions are not only inapplicable to ongoing practices: since they are worked out from an excessively simplified perspective on moral and political dimensions, if enacted, similar principles and models are likely to bring about undesirable results. This point is to be understood in connection to the already mentioned shortfalls connected to attributing excessive or exclusive weight to desirability.

Concluding, the couple desirability-feasibility is, first of all, a powerful analytical tool allowing to detect the methodological strategies underlying political theories and to uncover their understandings about the functions and tasks political philosophy is expected to carry out. Accordingly, references to the categories of desirability and feasibility consent to clearly grasp and account for what political theories aim at and to assess them by singling out with certain precision its weaknesses and merits. Moreover, the couple desirability-feasibility offers an

interesting key to understand the ongoing meta-theoretical debates from within a unified framework. Finally, desirability and feasibility criteria provide political philosophy with methodological guidance in the construction and justification of its principles and models by allowing one to assess which methodological strategy better serve the function and purposes it endorses.

**See also:**

*Counterfactuals; Facts and Principles; Justice; Objectivity; Philosophy and Politics; Realism and Idealism; Trade-off.*

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