

Consequentialism and the ideal theory debate in political philosophy

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Abstract: Consequentialism as an approach in political philosophy has plausible answers to the central challenges raised in the ideal vs non-ideal theory debate, or so I argue in this article. The ideal theory debate asks questions like: how far should political philosophy make idealising assumptions about reality? And how much utopian thinking is necessary or even desirable in political philosophy? I show that consequentialism avoids central charges raised against ideal theory, such as the charges that ideal theory builds in blind spots and that utopian thinking is both unnecessary and sometimes counterproductive when making comparative judgements. Conversely, consequentialism also avoids the charges raised against non-ideal theory. For example, some worry that by building real-world constraints into their model, ideal theories compromise their normative principles and reproduce injustices we find in the status quo. Consequentialism avoids those pitfalls, because it is uncompromising in its axiology whilst also offering an account within which we can flexibly adjust how ideal or non-ideal we want our theories to be. This flexible yet unified structure, I argue, also has independent advantages.

Key words: ideal theory; non-ideal theory; methods of political theory; practices; utilitarianism; consequentialism; instrumentalism