Pragmatic Belief and Political Agency

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Abstract: According to a recent methodological critique, much of contemporary political theory has lost touch with the realities of political life. The aim of this paper is to problematise the underlying antagonism between distant ideals and concrete contexts of agency. Drawing on Kant's notion of pragmatic Belief – the idea that in certain situations we can put full confidence in something we lack sufficient evidence for – I point to the distinctly practical function of political ideals that these disputes pay scant attention to. Particularly in political contexts, action is itself often framed by 'ideal constructions' that not only motivate and enable us to pursue uncertain goals, but ultimately feed back onto what is practically possible. The upshot is that especially if we are interested in a kind of theorising that is less detached from political practice, we should be wary of disregarding distant ideals as unduly utopian from the outset.

According to a recent methodological critique, much of contemporary political theory has lost touch with the realities of political life. Rather than searching for utopian ideals of how we ought to life together,[1] the argument goes, we should formulate normative principles that factor in the various constraints under which political agents actually operate. The aim of this paper is to problematise an antagonism underlying this critique and (to some extent) the ensuing debate as a whole: that between distant ideals and concrete contexts of agency. Drawing on Kant's notion of pragmatic Belief,[2] I point to the distinctly practical function of political ideals that the pertinent disputes pay scant attention to. I argue that action in political contexts is itself often framed by 'ideal constructions' that not only motivate and enable us to pursue uncertain goals, but ultimately feed back onto what is practically possible. The upshot is that particularly if we are interested in a kind of theorising that is less detached from political practice, we should be wary of disregarding distant ideals as unduly utopian from the outset.

The argument unfolds in three steps. I start by sketching the *anti-utopian* critique, according to which political theorists should be more sensitive to factual considerations about what we can realistically expect to achieve. The second section introduces Kant's conception of pragmatic Belief, that is a firm epistemic attitude we are warranted to adopt *without* sufficient evidence but because of some end we have set for ourselves. The thought is that in certain situations, where we lack the required evidence whether something is possible or not but have to act one way or another, we can choose firmly to accept a proposition on *practical* grounds. The implication is that subjective aspirations and objective feasibility are often reciprocally related, as the ideals that agents bring to bear in action co-determine the limits of what is practically possible. As I go on to argue in the third section, this insight is particularly pertinent to political life, where concrete efforts that elicit real-world change are often based on commitment to distant ends.

The limits of practical possibility

The last decade or so saw an enormous surge in methodological debates on the nature and status of political philosophy. A host of authors provoked renewed attention to the question what it is that we are doing when we theorise about politics, and how we should go about doing it. While their underlying concerns are often very distinct, many of them share a basic dissatisfaction with much of contemporary political philosophy in a broadly post-Rawlsian vein, which they regard as too idealistic, moralistic or abstract and thus ultimately unable or unwilling to provide solutions to urgent problems facing us here and now.

Here, I want to focus on one particular, *anti-utopian* critique of the existing methodological paradigm. Proponents of this critique question how ambitious the ideals should be that political theorists advocate and how much, in formulating them, they should be constrained by the limits of practical possibility. Rather than

constructing a "realistic utopia" in which justice is fully realized "someday, somewhere" (Rawls, 2001: 127), the argument goes, we should pay closer attention to the inherent (e.g. motivational and institutional) limitations under which the agents that are supposed to enact these ideal visions operate. Political ideals that are too distant and ambitious are unable to orient people's actions properly, as they stipulate a certain vision of what is desirable or valuable without sufficient reference to the facts 'on the ground'. Instead, we should closely study the (narrow) constraints within which political life and practice unfold and consequently show more caution in advocating possible worlds that go beyond them.

The anti-utopian critique comes in a number of shapes and disguises. Let me distinguish two versions of the basic accusation that political theory is too detached from the real world of politics: the *non-ideal* and the *realist* critiques. Notice that I have no intention to reduce them to one another. Realists in particular have been adamant that they see themselves as a fundamental alternative rather than an internal corrective to the post-Rawlsian paradigm (e.g. Sleat, 2016; Rossi and Sleat, 2014). I do believe, however, that it is possible to tease out an underlying anti-utopian theme that the two sets of critiques share.

The *non-ideal* critique starts from the assumption that much theory in a Rawlsian vein is too abstract and idealised as to be able to provide normative guidance for political action and reform under real-world circumstances.[3] In attempting to bracket salient facts about human nature and politics, the argument goes, it ends up being impracticable and unable to offer "workable solutions to any of the problems our societies face" (Stemplowska, 2008: 19). Instead, we should take into account the most important constraining features of our social and political world when it comes to the design and formulation of normative principles (Farrelly, 2007; Sen, 2006). Frameworks that seek to idealise or abstract away these features are flawed, irrelevant or

even dangerous from the outset and must be replaced with more non-ideal modes of theorising.

The *realist* critique starts from the basic tenet that politics constitutes a distinct domain of human activity that is fundamentally concerned with the always fragile attempt to bring order and peace to the conflict and disagreement realists take to be prevalent in social life. One possible conclusion from this idea is that the unalterable features of the political sphere impose a distinct set of feasibility constraints that warrant a "resolutely antiutopian stance" (Galston, 2010: 394, see also Hall, 2016).[4] Politics, on this view, is not concerned with realising one's preferred ideal visions of how we ought to live together, but with processes of bringing order to conflict through authoritative rule. To look beyond the narrow confines within which political life thus operates by confronting it with abstract utopias – as is the case, according to realists, with much theory within the post-Rawlsian paradigm –[5] is to fundamentally misunderstand its point and purpose. Normative ideals and principles that seek to transcends the hard-nosed realities of politics by refuting its inherent "realism constraint" (Raekstad, 2016) are futile at best or dangerous at worst.

Their undeniable differences notwithstanding, *non-ideal* and *realist* critics thus converge in a certain diagnosis as to the predicament of the post-Rawlsian methodological paradigm, as well as the basic gist of a possible remedy. The diagnosis is that political theory has lost touch with the realities of politics and the various (contingent or unalterable) constraints under which agents and institutions operate. The remedy consists in radically limiting the extent to which, as theorists, we confront real political life (and the agents we seek to address) with transcendent and ambitious ideals. That is to say, *before* we stipulate certain ideals as desirable, we need to study closely the social and political circumstances in which they are supposed to be implemented and the agents whose actions they are supposed to guide. Any ideal vision that goes *beyond* the narrow limits of practical

possibility opens up too vast a gap to the real world so as to be able to orient (motivationally and structurally constrained) real-world agents.

Now, one possible counter-reaction to the anti-utopian critique is to simply deny that the value of an ideal is necessarily a function of its capacity to guide action. This idea finds its most prominent and forceful articulation in the work of G.A. Cohen. According to theorists such as Cohen, the question for political philosophy "is not what we should do but what we should think, even when what we should think makes no practical difference" (Cohen, 2008: 268; see also 306-7). That is to say that the truth or rightness of, for instance, principles of justice is not contingent upon the feasibility of their implementation. Political philosophers are tasked to identify fundamental principles, even if they have no practical bearing upon our action.

In a similar vein, David Estlund has recently rejected the idea that the truth about justice is constrained by considerations regarding the likelihood of success in realizing it (Estlund, 2014: 115).[6] His preferred kind of "evaluative" or "aspirational" theory seeks to be normative without (necessarily) counselling action (Estlund, 2008: 258-276). On this account, the truth value of a proposition such as 'society would be better like this' remains unaffected by whether there is anything that makes sense to do in light of this fact. If a requirement to do something does not necessarily entail the ability to do that thing, justice might require things of people that they cannot bring themselves to do. So called "institutional principles", for instance, are insensitive to facts about human motivational capacities – they are not refuted by any facts about whether people will comply with them (Estlund, 2011: 218).[7] Estlund thus shares in a Cohenite spirit according to which political theory, as a pure normative enterprise that rigorously considers how the world ought to be, is not to be contaminated by considerations about how the world currently is, or what kinds of efforts real-world actors would be likely to invest.

The problem with this account, however, is that it only reinforces a narrative that insists on an irreconcilable contrast between concrete contexts of action on the one side, and ambitious political ideals on the other side. The choice it confronts us with is rather unappealing: either we take the value of an ideal to be contingent on (or even a direct function of) its passing some kind of feasibility test, such that it can be said to be within the objective bounds of practical possibility – or we bracket altogether the question whether our affirmed vision has any practical bearing on the circumstances in (and the agents to) which it is meant to apply. Either, it seems, we follow anti-utopian critics in tying action-guidance closely to the actual constitution of agents and their motivations, thus disregarding ideals that significantly depart from given circumstances as superfluous *tout court* – or we vindicate ideal ends independently of what we are capable of achieving here and now, thus indulging, from the critic's perspective, in a form of unconstrained, naïve utopianism. On a polemical reading, we are confronted with a choice between a cynical realism that capitulates to injustices that could at some point very well be superseded and an impotent idealism that vindicates unattainable ends even in the face of the most recalcitrant circumstances.

Of course, my attempt to evade this antagonism is not unprecedented. A popular position in the literature seeks to find a middle-ground between political pragmatism and idealism by following Rawls's own proposal (1971: 245/6) to *complement* ideal theory with non-ideal considerations (e.g. Valentini, 2009; Gilabert and Lawford-Smith, 2012; Simmons, 2010). The thought is that after having worked out a blueprint of the perfectly just society, we simply come up with an additional set of non-ideal considerations that tell us how to get there from current (imperfect) circumstances (in which, for instance, some people are unable or unwilling to comply with specified demands).[8] Non-ideal theory, on this understanding, is secondary to ideal theory

and strongly transitional in character. Ambitious ideals remain toothless without a map how to get there.

While I will lay out in more detail how my own proposal differs from this framework towards the end of the paper, at this point suffice it to say that my challenge is more fundamental. While the Rawlsian picture keeps faith with the priority of ambitious ideals over concrete context of agency, I shall question whether anything like a neat separation between the two can actually be sustained. Specifically, my argument in the remainder of the article will be that there is a reciprocal, indeed mutually constitutive relation between our subjective aspirations (the ends for the sake of which we act) and objective possibility (what we can practically attain through our actions). This claim is motivated by an observation about political agency: the observation that, from the perspective of the agent, the most ambitious ideals often underlie the most concrete political efforts, thus feeding back into the ultimate limits of practical possibility.

I shall make this case by pointing to a specific, distinctly *practical* function of political ideals that is being paid scant attention to. The thought is that ideals are not just blueprints of desirable worlds that reality falls short of. For as such, they are necessarily construed in opposition to political practice as that which is tasked to bring the real world closer to its ideal representation. Instead, political ideals often motivate and thus enable concrete political efforts such that what is feasible for political agents is co-determined by what they take to be desirable. The implication is that even and *particularly* if we are interested in paying close attention to concrete contexts of agency (as proponents of the anti-utopian critique eagerly are), we should rather not disregard distant ideals as too ambitious or utopian from the outset, as they often form part of those very contexts. It is Immanuel Kant in conversation with whom I shall make this case.

Kant on pragmatic belief

Kant may appear to be an unlikely ally in a project that seeks to overcome the stark contrast between 'ideal' and 'real' that characterises some of the current methodological disputes in political theory. For he generally goes as the usual suspect when supposedly detached kinds of normative theorising come under scrutiny for their failure to provide guidance. Bernard Williams, for instance, rehashes a familiar critique of what is commonly considered Kant's dualism of ideal and real worlds and the ensuing two-level (yet one-way) model of the relationship between theory and practice, where moral theory lays down ideal principles that are then to be implemented politically (Williams, 2005: 1). In a similar vein, Raymond Geuss (2008: 8/9) explicitly blames "Kantianism" for the prevalent disregard for "real motivation". However, beyond and largely independently of a rationalist and admittedly demanding moral theory that may not be everyone's cup of tea, we can find in Kant's work a thoroughly realistic account of agency that is particularly pertinent to political contexts. In this section, I will introduce his conception of pragmatic Belief in order to show how commitments to our ideal ends often figure as a framework for action, thus motivating and indeed enabling it.

Belief without evidence

Rather than Kant's political philosophy, I shall focus on his epistemology – in particular his work on propositional attitudes, that is the mental states we (justifiably) take up towards a particular proposition. At the very end of the *Critique of Pure Reason,* in a section entitled "On Opining, Knowing, and Believing" (CPR A820/B848– A831/B59; see also Logic 24: 142-152, 9: 65-81),[9] Kant introduces a number of positive epistemic attitudes and lays out the conditions under which we have warrant to hold them.[10] Propositional attitudes such as

knowing that p, opining that p, or *being convinced that p* are species of the genus of "assent" ("'Fürwahrhalten'"), that is the general willingness (on whatever grounds and with whatever confidence) to take a proposition on board – literally, to hold something to be true (CPR A822/B850; see also Chignell, 2007a: 34). The thought is that, depending on the objective and subjective circumstances in which we find ourselves, various kinds of assent (of differing confidence and strength) are rationally warranted.

The striking claim that we find Kant making in this context, and the one I will focus on, is that there is a particularly strong kind of assent – "practical Belief" – which we are licensed to hold *without sufficient objective* grounds, that is reliable information (e.g. through perception, memory or deductive inference) about the pertinent object or state of affairs (CPR A820/B848). That is to say, in the case of practical Belief we find ourselves firmly committed to something for which there is no sufficient evidence. This is puzzling: surely, we would expect an agent to suspend judgment or at least take a proposition on board very tentatively under these circumstances; the idea that rational assent to a proposition requires evidence in favour of its truth is not only an empiricist commonplace but also deeply intuitive. Yet, Kant describes practical Belief as a highly confident, "assertoric" (Logic 9:66) kind of holding-true whose strength comes even close to that of knowledge.

In order to elucidate this idea, we need to attend to the two conditions that Kant specifies for practical Belief to be warranted: *practical necessity* and *theoretical undecidability*.[11] First, there needs to be a relation between the assent to a proposition and an end that the subject has set for herself – the relevant Belief is a precondition and thus *practically necessary* for the attainability (and hence, as we shall see shortly, our pursuit) of the end we have set for ourselves. Kant introduces this idea through a distinction between two kinds of 'merits' an assent can have for us, that is properties that make it valuable or desirable for a particular subject to have, given her goals, interests, or

needs (Chignell, 2007a: 51). The most obvious merit is of an *epistemic* kind: our main intellectual goal as theoretical reasoners is to maximize the number of assents about the world that are likely to be true (thus counting, under the right conditions, as knowledge) and to minimize the number of falsehoods. Yet, Kant notably thinks that assents can also have different, *non-epistemic* merits. They can have properties that make them valuable not in indicating that the relevant proposition is true, but because they bear a practical relation to an end a subject has set for herself.

In order to understand what *kind* of practical relation Kant has in mind between our assent to a proposition and an end we have set for ourselves, we must focus on an assumption he brings to the table: for psychological reasons, we can only set an end for ourselves that we take to be at least in principle attainable (e.g. CPrR 5:113/4).[12] The basic thought is that whether we can attain an end we have set for ourselves depends not only on our own capacities (call these *agential conditions*) but also certain background or *environmental conditions* (including the actions of other agents). Practical Beliefs *affirm* that these conditions pertain, such that our efforts directed at the end are not in vain. By virtue of doing so, they have the *non-epistemic merit* of allowing us to pursue or even attain the relevant end.

The basic assumption that our actions are efficacious is neither very controversial nor, I take it, necessarily explicit as far as many of our day-to-day ends and activities are concerned. Whenever I set out to do something, I assume that my own abilities and the causal background conditions are such that it is within my power to do so – according to Kant, this is what distinguishes *willing* something from *merely wishing* it (MoM 6:213). Now, the more contingencies that are beyond my control enter the picture, the more tenuous my assumption that the end at stake is attainable becomes. Practical Beliefs are thus particularly essential in situations where I have set for myself distant or ambitious ends that I can bring about only mediately. In order to be

(psychologically) able to at least 'do my part' and even pursue and work towards such ends, I may have to adopt a practical Belief that explicitly affirms that my efforts are not futile but instead coincide (in ways that may very well remain causally obscure to me) with the requisite external circumstances. Any agent would end up frustrated and paralysed if the world consistently refused to responds to their efforts.

Now, it may seem as though Kant is effectively issuing a blank cheque for holding true all kinds of dubious propositions, even in the face of overwhelming contradicting evidence. In response to this worry, take note of the second condition that needs to be fulfilled in order for practical Belief to be warranted: *theoretical undecidability*. The thought is that we cannot have sufficient evidence either for or against the truth of the proposition at stake. The reflexivity is vital here: we lack sufficient information about the object or state of affairs in question, and we acknowledge that this is the case. As a corollary, we hold a practical Belief with the reflexive awareness that our objective knowledge of the world does not thereby increase.

The most famous items of practical Belief are the so called "postulates" that Kant introduces in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. The background to this argument is his vindication of an unconditional duty to set as an end for ourselves what he calls the "Highest Good"; a world whose inhabitants are completely virtuous and, because of their virtue, completely happy (CPrR 5:110-111).[13] The problem is that the attainment of such a world seems plainly beyond our power. Not only is it impossible for ourselves to become perfectly virtuous within our lifetime, let alone see to it that everyone else also acts on the moral law. Even if that was possible, it still remained beyond our power to bring about the required harmony between virtuousness and happiness. In order to get out of this conundrum, Kant introduces God's existence and our own immortality as so called "postulates" of pure practical reason (CPrR 5:107-148; see also Wood, 1970: Ch.4). The Beliefs that our souls are immortal (such that we can infinitely approach our own

complete conformity with the moral law) and that there is an almighty and benevolent God (capable of ensuring the precise harmony between virtue and happiness) allows us to hope that our moral efforts may eventually be rewarded and thus enables us to work towards the Highest Good without a sense of moral despair.[14]

Notice that the conditions of practical Belief are fulfilled. On the one hand, the postulates are *practically necessary*: we couldn't coherently will the Highest Good without the assurance that the *agential* and *environmental* conditions are such that we can at least approximate it: not only are we the kind of agents who can actually strive toward moral perfection, there is also a being who ensures that virtue will be rewarded with happiness. Moreover, Kant takes traditional metaphysical questions such as the existence of God and the immortality of our soul to be *theoretically undecidable*: they are beyond the bounds of sensible experience such that knowledge about them is constitutively unavailable for humans. This paves the way for the adoption of an attitude of Belief for practical purposes.

Moral Belief and pragmatic Belief

I have just introduced Kant's notion of practical Belief as a firm but non-evidential kind of holding true. The idea is that the assent to a proposition is justified not in virtue of sufficient objective evidence that makes it likely to be true, but its practical relation to an end a subject has set for herself – most importantly, because the assent in question has the (non-epistemic) merit of allowing her to work towards or achieve the goal. In order to introduce this idea, I drew on Kant's argument for Belief in the postulates of practical reason.

It is vital at this point to highlight that the postulates constitute a particular *kind* of practical Belief that Kant calls "moral Belief" (see CPR A830/B858; CPrR 5:146). Moral Beliefs pertain to ends (such as the Highest Good) that are unconditionally – that is, morally (and thus,

for Kant, rationally) – required. Now, the very idea that there are ends that are given by reason *a priori* such that every rational agent must set them for herself is highly controversial. In order to give my framework a wider appeal, I will thus bracket the case of moral Belief at this point and instead focus on a different species of practical Belief that is not contingent on Kant's fundamental meta-ethical commitments (in particular, his rationalism about practical normativity). In the case of what Kant calls "pragmatic Belief" (CPR A823/B851; Chignell, 2007b: 337-354), the pertinent end is not morally required but is instead agent- or context-relative: a subject just happens to have set it for herself under given circumstances. Kant argues that the contingent non-epistemic merits of the relevant assent can equally give us (pragmatic) reasons that count in favour of Belief.

Intuitively, all of us are familiar with situations in our daily life where we do not know whether an end we have set for ourselves is achievable, yet its pursuit requires full confidence that the requisite circumstances on which our success is contingent pertain. Given that the cases Kant himself discusses in this context are not very illuminating (cf. Chignell, 2007b: 338-340), let me briefly sketch two kinds of examples that I borrow from different contexts. The first group involves cases where the truth of the proposition at stake partly depends on the subject's acceptance of it. In the context of an argument related to Kant's, Williams James (1956) famously discusses the case of a mountain climber facing a chasm that she has to jump across on the only route home. She cannot (on the basis of the evidence available to her) come to a conclusive judgment whether she can make it. We further stipulate that (for psychological reasons) the firm Belief *that she will manage to jump across the chasm* is itself a necessary condition for achieving the end the climber has set for herself, that is jumping across the chasm (and hence the further end of getting home safely). Under these circumstances, she has rational warrant for Believing that she is going to make it. Here, the truth of the proposition itself is partly

contingent on the climber's firm assent to it: Belief in her ability of jump across the chasm is necessary (though not sufficient) for it to be actually possible.

A second group of examples surrounds questions of trust in social relationships. In these cases, the assent itself does not make the proposition true,[15] but is nevertheless a necessary precondition for the continued pursuit of the end we have set for ourselves. Guy Longworth (2017) argues that we are warranted to trust other people (regardless of whether we know them or whether they are complete strangers) without conclusive evidence for their trustworthiness. For, as limited beings we need to rely on others for many of our ends and projects in our daily lives, which gives us (pragmatic) reasons to hold that those others will be appropriately reliable. In personal relationships, where the thriving of that very relationship may be an intrinsic end, this is even more urgent.[16] Andrew Chignell argues that a father's interest in maintaining a good relationship with his teenage son licenses him to assume the best of him whenever possible; at least until sufficient evidence – for instance, that "he turns your house into an opium den of Edwardian proportions when you are away" (Chignell, 2007b: 344) – is available. Similarly, we may think that partners in a monogamous romantic relationship partners have strong pragmatic reasons to Believe in their respective partner's faithfulness until evidence to the opposite is conclusive.

Now, pragmatic Beliefs differ from moral Beliefs not merely with regard to the kind of ends that are at stake. We are also confronted with a distinct kind of *theoretical undecidability*. Recall that in the case of moral Belief, any possible evidence either for or against a proposition (such as God's existence) on the basis of which we could form a reliable judgment is constitutively unavailable from the outset. Call this *metaphysical undecidability*. In contrast, cases of pragmatic Belief are characterised by what I want to call *situational undecidability*. There, the fact that we do not have sufficient evidence is contingent on a

particular situation we find ourselves in, for instance because we have simply failed to gather the relevant information. It could be different in a nearby possible world.

In one of Kant's own examples, a doctor sets out to cure a dangerously ill person (CPR A823/B351). While she has some information at her avail about the patient's symptoms and about the kinds of diseases that typically generate these symptoms, these facts alone do not provide sufficient epistemic support for a reliable diagnosis. Kant argues that, under these circumstances, the doctor is warranted to decisively judge which disease the patient has and prescribe the according treatment, given that this is the only way to keep open the possibility of recovery in the first place. What she faces is a case of *situational undecidability* – had the doctor just been better trained or done more research he could presumably have obtained the evidence required for a reliable diagnosis.

We need to make a further distinction here.[17] In some rare cases, the problem may be that we lack evidence for or against a proposition altogether (*situational undecidability$_1$*). Imagine a scenario where you have to ask a random stranger in an unfamiliar city for the way. You may have no reliable evidence for deciding whether to trust the person's directions whatsoever – though possibly practical reasons to do so. Much more frequently (and interestingly), however, we are confronted with competing and possibly conflicting evidence (call this *situational undecidability$_2$*). This requires of agents to engage in probabilistic judgment, negotiating their Beliefs (and ultimately the ends to which they pertain) with the available evidence. The most pressing question that arises in these contexts is when the information or evidence for or against the truth of a proposition becomes "sufficient", such that it can no longer be said to be theoretically undecidable. That is to say, at which point precisely does a pragmatic Belief turn into either something weaker such as wishful thinking, or something stronger such as knowledge or justified belief (in the contemporary sense)?

I want to avoid circumscribing the domain of theoretical undecidability too narrowly. Hence, I follow Leslie Stevenson's proposal (2003: 39) that only certainty can rule out pragmatic Beliefs. That is, if the evidence concerning the truth of a proposition lies anywhere between 1 (complete certainty) and 0 (certainty of the negation) it goes through as *theoretically undecidable*.[18] As long as the evidence for or against a proposition is not conclusive but a resolute decision is called for, we are licensed "to choose firmly to accept a proposition: presuppose it, act on it, assert it, defend it" (Chignell, 2007: 243).

That is not to deny, of course, that agents may very well want to trade the available evidence off against their Beliefs already well below the threshold of certainty. I may be inclined to give up on an end I have set for myself simply because its attainment does not seem very likely, particularly if I am not very firmly committed to it or if there are competing ends to adopt instead. In contrast, Beliefs related to ends that I am very strongly committed to, for instance because they relate to central aspects of my identity, social relations or life-plans, are likely to be more recalcitrant in the face of conflicting evidence. The (weak) evidentiary constraint I have argued for is merely concerned with the conditions under which the adoption of a pragmatic Belief is *rationally warranted*, rather than (for instance) whether it may be advisable or prudent to hold on the the relevant end (and the requisite Beliefs).

Once the evidence against a proposition is conclusive, however, a pragmatic Belief turns into wishful thinking. Keep in mind, hence, that Kant is not a crass utilitarian about assents: we cannot firmly adopt just any proposition on the mere grounds that doing so would be useful with regard to an end we have set for ourselves. The practical kind of justification I have laid out in this section presupposes that a sufficient theoretical justification is unavailable. I would be irrational to insist on firmly assenting to the proposition that *P is true* against better knowledge. Nor will it do to weaken the propositional attitude and

simply act *as if P was true*: only the firm assent that Kant takes to be characteristic for a practical Belief can motivate action in the way envisioned. It comes with a distinct disposition to "feel" that the proposition is true that other, more tenuous assents – for instance, if we assume something "for the sake of argument" – lack. Wishful thinking is thus either irrational or fails to serve its purpose.

Pragmatism about political ideals

The aim of the preceding section was to invite us to rethink the relation between subjective aspiration and the (conceived) limits of practical possibility, which turned out to be more problematic, reciprocal and intertwined than conventional wisdom (and current methodological orthodoxy) would have it. On the one hand, human action becomes meaningful only through an orientation towards its own project goals. That is to say, agents often frame their action with imaginative representations that transcend "the confines of a hard-nosed realism" (Goldman, 2012: 503), and they are not necessarily irrational to do so. On the other hand, there is a sense in which the ideals we set for ourselves and bring to bear in action co-determine what we can achieve and thus ultimately shift the limits of what is practically possible.

In returning from Kant to the contemporary context, let me start by indicating why I take the account defended in the preceding section to offer a useful framework for thinking about contexts of political agency in particular. Notice, to that effect, that many of the ideals, projects and ends we pursue in politics are such that a confident assertion of their attainability is both *practically necessary* and *theoretically undecidable*, thus warranting pragmatic Beliefs.

In the preceding section, I have already indicated that pragmatic Beliefs are practically necessary particularly in cases where we set ourselves ends that are distant and ambitious. Many of our political

ideals, describing collective ends such as larger normative visions of society as a whole, are precisely of that kind. In order to be efficacious, our own efforts directed at realising these ends have to coincide with a myriad of environmental conditions beyond our control (specifically, the actions of countless other agents).[19] What is more, political change typically proceeds in gradual, non-linear and path-dependent ways. We will thus often not even be able to witness the possible attainment of the final end towards which our efforts are directed. Under these circumstances, pragmatic Beliefs allow us to think of our political agency as efficacious in the sense of being part of and contributing to larger, ongoing and ambitious political projects. Taking up the fight against deeply engrained injustices such as global poverty or racial discrimination, for instance, may require a pragmatic Belief that they actually *can* be eradicated, or at least attenuated and alleviated.

Moreover, it is precisely by virtue of their distant and ambitious nature that the attainability of these ideals is typically a matter of *situational undecidability$_2$*. We are bound to be confronted with conflicting evidence (e.g. of social scientific, historical or psychological kind) whether institutional arrangements, social practices or motivational dispositions actually can be transformed in the requisite ways. Yet, I doubt that the evidence for or against the attainability of a certain social arrangement will ever be conclusive. While we often lack insight even into our *own* ability to achieve something we have set out to do, this applies *a forteriori* to collective goals whose attainment requires coordinated actions of a plurality of agents to materialise (Jensen, 2009:176-178). Human agency and life-forms seem too malleable to conclusively rule out the attainability of an end or ideal (that remains within basic nomological constraints) on purely evidential grounds.

If it is correct that much politics thus takes place precisely in the realm between the 'iron cage' of unchangeable realities (where our efforts would appear to be pointless from the outset) on the one hand,

and naïve utopianism (where possible worlds seem readily available) on the other hand, then political agency is almost inconceivable without some kind of progressive aspiration. In other words, it requires precisely the "volatile mix of uncertainty, risk and conviction" (Goldman, 2012: 205) that is characteristic for pragmatic Beliefs.

Notice, though, that pragmatic Beliefs are not just indispensable in politics. It is also a domain in which subjective aspiration *can* make a difference: by orienting our action towards political ideals, we can bring reality itself closer to the desired goal. This comes through most clearly in contexts of political struggle, change and transformation. As Mark Jensen points out, many of those activists who have been critical in making possible what we might consider genuine instances of historical progress – the abolition of slavery, the civil rights movement or decolonization – were precisely *not* operating under the constraints of present conditions but "aimed for something beyond what they could even see as possible through history: they had visions for how their societies could be different" (Jensen, 2009: 180). That is to say, they put ideal visions in the service of concrete political action. And in so doing, they ultimately shifted the limits of practical possibility through their own subjective aspirations: what at one point lay beyond a realistic utopia became feasible later on. These agents, that is to say, used political ideals not as blueprints stipulating a final end or a predetermined future that political practice would simply be tasked to approximate or attain. Rather, they employed them with the distinctly practical function of guiding, motivating and orienting action here and now. In so doing, they were capable of eliciting tangible change in the real world regardless of whether the relevant ends were eventually fully attained.

One of the political ideals that have turned out to be most momentous in their aspirational function in recent political history is that of human rights.[20] Proponents of the anti-utopian critique, particularly those driven by realist concerns, are highly suspicious of

their "frivolous" (Williams, 2005: 25; see also Geuss, 2005) nature, as stipulating a desirable world without any reference to the political contexts and means for achieving or realising it. Yet, these authors tend to bypass the critical and emancipatory power human rights can have independently of whether a world in which they are realised is imminent. In political struggles they are frequently invoked as "oppositional utopias" (McKean, 2011: 9), that is distinctly political instruments and claims against prevailing institutions or injustices. As such they can inspire, guide and orient action in the present rather than stipulating blueprints for the future. They point to possible worlds beyond existing practices rather than necessarily expressing a longing to *transcend* politics.[21]

Now, it is important to keep in mind that so far I have made a case about the phenomenology of political agency, concerned with the justificatory conditions of pragmatic Belief. My claim was that under certain circumstances, where we have set out to do something, we are warranted to adopt a firm but non-evidentiary propositional attitude that allows us to pursue or even attain our end. Let me now pick up the methodological concerns raised in the first section and draw out the theoretical implications of this observation. Of course, when we theorise about politics we are not usually interested in the question whether we have a rational license to stick to a given end that we have set for ourselves. Rather, we seek to balance and choose among a set of principles and ideals concerning the organisation of political life.

As already mentioned, under these conditions we are unlikely to fully exhaust the limits of warranted assertability. Instead, we will be inclined to trade off considerations of feasibility and desirability with regard to a variety of candidate proposals. And yet, our insight concerning the phenomenology of political agency – that there is a reciprocal relation rather than a stark contrast between distant ideals and the limits of practical possibility in politics – is one that we must take seriously also when it comes to theorising. In particular, we should

be wary of disregarding ambitious ends as excessively utopian from the outset, given that their practical or aspirational function goes well beyond the sense in which they are blueprints that reality falls short of. Moreover, we would not be well-advised to turn certain features of political and social reality into permanent constraints on what can be achieved, given that it is agency based on the most distant ideal visions that can help to surmount some of those features.

Notice that my case for attending to the *pragmatic* significance of far-reaching political ideals does not come at the detriment of our attention to concrete contexts of action or, more broadly speaking, the practicality of political theorising. To the contrary: particularly if we seek to re-establish the connection to reality that political theory is (according to the anti-utopian critique) said to have lost touch with by focusing on how people *actually* are and how political life *really* works, we would better not lose sight of the practical significance of utopian ideals. It is precisely its concern with the motivational circumstances of human agency that allows the Kant-inspired model to overcome this stark opposition. Ideal constructions matter *in virtue* of the way in which they frame action.

The anti-utopian charge that theorists concerned with distant ideals *necessarily* fail to engage appropriately with real political practice seems at least premature. Rather, it is methodological accounts that get rid of progressive visions altogether, which are likely neither to help us make political agency intelligible nor provide reliable guidance when it comes to the limits of practical possibility. Instead, we must seek to integrate ambitious political ideals that bear witness to a better world with the actual human efforts directed towards attaining them. While this is an ambition that goes well beyond the present paper, the first step is to thematise more explicitly the bridge between subjective aspirations and (the limits of) objective possibility in politics rather than construing them as in stark opposition.

There is no doubt that my picture reverberates, to some extent, with the Rawlsian framework briefly sketched in the first section. On this view, we require an ambitious ideal that guides our activity under non-ideal circumstances. There may even be a sense in which, in order to play this function as a horizon that provides practical orientation, we must take this ideal of perfect justice to be attainable. That said, Rawls does ultimately uphold a neat separation between the ideal and the concrete contexts of agency directed at it. We start by painting a picture of an ideal society – pricing in supposedly unchangeable constraints such as the fact of 'reasonable pluralism' – and consequently attend to the real-world conditions under which we must bring it about. On the one hand, the non-ideal considerations determine the appropriate *version* of the ideal; for instance, whether the principles of justice are best implemented "liberal democratic socialism" and "property-owning democracy" (Rawls, 2001: 134–140). On the other hand, they specify the necessary *steps* towards the ideal, that is, whether we may have to pursue short-term policies that implement the ambitious ideal only weakly and partially in order to pave the way for its full realisation at a later point in time (see also Gilabert, 2012: 50/51).

What Rawls does *not* envision, however, is that our agency under concrete, non-ideal circumstances may also feed back on what we can ultimately achieve. The 'realistic utopia' that he starts from already exhausts the limits of practical possibility. It is a timeless snapshot of perfect justice that remains unaffected by our efforts to approach it. While Rawls (2001: 34; see also Jansen, 2009: 169) himself at some point anticipates that there is a "deep question" how the limits of practical possibility may themselves shift, he never gets round to addressing it.[22] To do precisely this has been the aim of the preceding argument.

Conclusion

I started this paper by introducing the anti-utopian critique as proposing a diagnosis and a remedy. The diagnosis was that much of contemporary political theory has lost sight of the circumstances and constraints under which real politics takes place. I have not taken sides with regard to the accuracy of this critique nor shall I do so now. What I have sought to challenge was the proposed remedy, that is the claim that we could leave this supposed conundrum behind by radically constraining or even dispensing altogether with ideal ends and progressive visions. As I hope to have shown through my discussion of Kant's notion of pragmatic Belief, the significance of certain kinds of practical commitments in actual, concrete contexts of agency indicates that turning one's back on utopian thinking altogether may actually run counter to the very aim of making political theory more realistic. This, however, is not to fall for a kind of naïve optimism that characterises some forms of contemporary ideal theorising. For we saw that what motivates Kant to assign such a prominent role to ideal representations is precisely the reciprocal, indeed mutually constitutive relation in which they stand to our actions. The idealism of the Kant-inspired model I have sketched thus speaks to an uncompromising pragmatism about political ideals rather than the starry-eyed utopianism it is often associated with.

Acknowledgements

[1] I operate with a deliberately broad and abstract notion of an ideal as a "model of excellence or conception of perfection around which we can orient our thoughts and conduct" (Brownlee, 2010: 242).

[2] I follow Andrew Chignell (2007b: 335) in capitalising Kant's technical notion of "Belief" ('Glaube', often translated as 'Faith') in order to distinguish it from "belief" in the contemporary sense, which is closer to Kant's notion of "assent" as the genus of which Belief is one species.

[3] For different attempts to systematize the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory see Stemplowska (2008), Swift (2008), and Valentini (2012).

[4] A further, more radical conclusion (that I bracket for the purposes of this paper) from the assumption that politics constitutes an autonomous sphere is that we must fundamentally rethink the nature and source of political normativity or even give up on the very idea of political theory as action-guiding in any conventionally sense (e.g. Geuss 2008; Rossi 2015). While I do not think that this concern is entirely unrelated to the anti-utopian strand I focus on, some realists do. Enzo Rossi (2015: 411), for instance, argues that "one can be a realist and demand the impossible, as it were – ignore feasibility constraints, so long as one's political norms aren't grounded in moralistic, pre-political values".

[5] Gledhill (2012) and Jubb (2015) have raised serious doubts as to whether Rawls himself is an appropriate target for realists.

[6] See also David Wiens's (2016) recent critique of Estlund's approach.

[7] Estlund (2011: 218) distinguishes institutional *principles*, which "describe institutional arrangements as part of a broader prescription or proposal, even if the described arrangement itself is not proposed or prescribed", from institutional *proposals* that concretely "propose the implementation of rules and arrangements".

[8] Allen Buchanan (2004: 61) discusses this problem under the notion of accessibility, that is the need for a theory or ideal to come with a "practicable route from where we are now to at least a reasonable approximation of the state of affairs that satisfies its principles", in particular such that its "effective implementation […] is compatible with human psychology, human capacities generally, the laws of nature, and the natural resources available to human beings".

[9] All references to Kant refer to the volume and page number of the Prussian Academy edition, published at Cambridge University Press under the editorship of Allen Wood and Paul Guyer. Abbreviations used are CPR (*Critique of Pure Reason),* CPrR (*Critique of Practical Reason)*, Logic (*Lectures on Logic*), MoM (*Metaphysics of Morals*), PP (*Perpetual Peace*).

member of the 'alt-right' as much as the emancipatory and progressive ideals that my examples have centred around and which sit more comfortably with most theorists' own convictions.

[21] I should emphasise that what is affirmed in this case is the attainability of a world in which human rights are realised, rather than the existence of some kind of normative property that endows humans with the requisite normative standing. Throughout this article, I am interested in what we might call 'modal' practical Beliefs (firm assents to empirical propositions) rather than 'normative' practical Beliefs (assents to moral propositions). I am grateful to an anonymous referee for urging me to clarify.

[22] A number of authors who broadly adopt the Rawlsian framework have identified this problem and tried to rectify it. Pablo Gilabert (2012: 49), for instance, argues that there is a need for a "deliberative reflective equilibrium", given that our short-term efforts may modify the very long-term, ambitious principles they are aimed at. In a similar vein, Marc Jensen (2009: 184) defends "progressive, rather than static, ideals" that take into account what he calls agents' "second-order abilities" to shift the limits of practical possibility.

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