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Utopophobia as a Vocation:
The Professional Ethics of Ideal and Nonideal Political Theory

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Who is so absorbed in the investigation and study of creation, but that, even though he were working and pondering over tasks never so much worth mastering and even though he thought he could number the stars and measure the length and breadth of the universe, he would drop all those problems and cast them aside, if word were suddenly brought to him of some critical peril to his country, which he could relieve or repel?

–Cicero, *De Officiis*. 1:154¹

1. There are activities far more valuable than fiddling that are nonetheless impermissible so long as Rome burns. Cicero argues that any decent citizen would abandon even the most exalted forms of scientific and philosophical inquiry if they conflicted with his civic responsibilities. “The duties prescribed by justice must be given precedence over the pursuit of knowledge and the duties imposed by it” he says, “for the former concern the welfare of our fellow-men; and nothing ought to be more sacred in men's eyes than that.”²

Among the knowledge-seeking pursuits that can be trumped by duties of justice might be the pursuit of knowledge about justice itself—assuming, that is, that this knowledge is only valuable qua knowledge, that it does not actually help us fulfill our civic responsibilities. Regardless of whether we are contemplating the starry heavens or some heavenly utopia, when smoke from the Forum begins filtering into the library, good Romans must abandon their studies, grab a bucket, and help douse the flames.

Admittedly, the responsibilities of citizens who are also astronomers or political philosophers are somewhat more complicated now than they were in Cicero's day. As has been observed repeatedly, most famously by Benjamin Constant,³ a key difference between the ancient and modern worlds is a massive rise the division of labor, not only in economics, but in ethics and politics as well. All modern individuals are (or ought to be) citizens of states, but they also choose (or ought to choose) a vocation. While certain moral and political tasks are still the responsibility of all, most have been entrusted to particular professions. As long as we are confident that the larger social structure remains functional, we can pursue the particular tasks of

¹ Translated by Walter Miller for the Loeb Classical Library Edition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913. Available online at <http://www.loebclassics.com/>.

² Ibid., 1:155.

³ Benjamin Constant, “The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns,” (1816), in *Political Writings*. Translated and Edited by Biancamaria Fontana. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 308-328.

our professions secure in the knowledge that we are paying for someone else to perform duties that might otherwise have fallen to us. No need to rush from the library with a bucket at the first whiff of smoke, at least not so long as the sound of sirens reassures us that professional firefighters are on their way.

Yet while the modern division of labor eases the moral and civic burdens for most of us, it makes the particular moral and civic responsibilities of some even more acute. What allows me to remain in the library as fires burn is that others have a duty, not to grab the occasional bucket, but to train for years in the techniques of effective firefighting, to spend their assigned shifts on call at the fire station, and to be ready to douse any fire effectively at a moment's notice. The firefighters, in turn, rely on bureaucrats to administer funds for their salaries and equipment, engineers to design this equipment, factory workers to build it, politicians to debate and allocate each year's firefighting budget, university lecturers to train aspiring politicians in the norms of politics, and so on. If any link in this chain breaks down, if anyone fails to fulfill his or her professional responsibilities, then we're each stuck grabbing for our own buckets.

Professional ethics is the field of applied moral philosophy concerned with the special responsibilities of each vocation in a modern society. The extent of the literature on the subject varies from vocation to vocation; the amount written on the professional ethics of medicine, business, and law is massive and mushrooming, the volume of material on politics and bureaucracy as vocations is small but growing, but the ethical literature on scholarship as a vocation is quite wanting. Instead of a broad set of values, duties and virtues, the existing literature on "research ethics" is mostly concerned with a set of codified, bureaucratically enforced rules. A few of these rightly apply to all research—rules against plagiarism and the fabrication of data, for example. The majority, however, were originally designed to protect human subjects in biomedical experimentation. Humanists and social scientists legitimately object to the sort of "ethical imperialism" that seeks to impose these rules where they do not belong.⁴

What this fails to recognize is that all scholarship raises important ethical concerns. Even political philosophers and theorists, ensconced comfortably in their armchairs, need to think about how their activity—and their claim on scarce social resources—is justified in terms of its place within the larger division of economic, civic, and moral labor. Complain as we might in the UK about the baleful effects of the government's "impact agenda," the basic notion that the public which pays for our armchairs has a right to demand an account of the value of our activities is unavoidably correct. It is ironic that normative theorists—who devote so much effort to the ethical scrutiny of everything from global trade patterns to individual eating habits—have done so little ethical evaluation of their own vocational practices.

In addition to helping us better fulfill our professional responsibilities, a focus on professional ethics can also help illuminate existing disputes within our profession—including, but hardly limited to, the so-called ideal/nonideal political theory debate. This debate has typically been

⁴ Zachary M. Schrag, *Ethical Imperealism: Institutional Review Boards and the Social Sciences, 1965-2009*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. See also Will C. van den Hoonaard, *The Seduction of Ethics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011.

framed as a meta-level disagreement *about* normative theory. What, exactly, is the relationship between normative truths and facts about the world, between the development of ideals and guidance on how to reach them, between utopia and reality? I hope that this essay will demonstrate that the ideal/nonideal debate can be helpfully reframed as a ground-level debate *within* normative theory—more specifically, within the branch of normative theory concerned with delegating responsibilities among today’s many and varied professions. Although there has been some recognition that the ideal/non-ideal debate has garnered so much attention because it raises such fundamental questions about the vocation of political theory,⁵ it has not yet been appreciated that these questions are most fruitfully addressed as falling within the field of professional ethics.

My thesis is that if the community of academic political theorists and philosophers cannot help us navigate the problems we face in actual political life, they have not lived up to the moral demands of their vocation. Political philosophy is an integral part of the division of civic labor in a healthy modern society. We are given the time and resources necessary for extended reflection on political matters, not because our brilliance gives us moral *carte blanche* to spend scarce resources contemplating whatever interests us, but because young citizens need teachers, and mature citizens need gadflies, to spur them to engage in serious reflection on the choices they face in their civic lives. A wholly disengaged profession of political philosophy, concerned only with the design of utopian ideals, is no more permissible than a firefighting profession concerned only with daydreams about frictionless fire poles and faster-than-light fire engines. Neither does anything to help save Rome from burning.

As such, a moderate form of what David Estlund decries as “utopophobia”⁶ is actually an integral element of a proper professional ethic for political philosophers. By moderate utopophobia, I mean a healthy dose of suspicion toward all political-philosophical theories without practical relevance. While the extreme utopophobe is opposed to all utopian theories as such, the moderate utopophobe acknowledges that devoting scarce time and resources to constructing such theories may sometimes be justifiable, but it is never self-justifying. To the contrary, utopianism is defensible only insofar as it can reasonably be expected to help inform or improve nonutopian political thinking.

If we wished, we could set up a division of labor between political “theorists” doing realistic work and political “philosophers” constructing utopias that somehow inform or improve the work of their more practically-minded colleagues. Yet while such specialization is permissible, it is not required, and I will continue to use the terms “philosopher” and “theorist” interchangeably to refer to anyone who does scholarly work on normative political questions. What is impermissible, according to the moderate utopophobe, is for everyone who thinks and writes on this subject to focus exclusively on building utopias. We must therefore be vigilant lest the system of incentives that structure our profession encourage only utopian theorizing, something that I will argue it is dangerously inclined to do.

My argument is structured as follows. First, I recast the existing ideal/non-ideal theory debate in terms of professional ethics, tracing its turn from a healthy disagreement about how we can best

⁵ See Marc Stears, “The Vocation of Political Theory: Principles, Empirical Inquiry and the Politics of Opportunity,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 4:4 (2005), 325-350.

⁶ David Estlund, “Utopophobia,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 42:2 (2014), 113-134.

achieve the socially valuable purposes of our profession to a more problematic disagreement about whether our professional practices should be of any use at all. Even if Estlund is correct that uselessly utopian political theory may nonetheless be both true and valuable, it does not follow that pursuing these useless truths exhausts our professional responsibilities. I then discuss how Estlund's argument reflects a pathology common to many professions, as closed communities of specialists come to lose sight of the external purpose of their vocation and the duties that follow from it. Finally, I sketch a vision of the proper relationship between citizens inside and outside professional political theory. Although this relationship creates a space for scholars to engage in a very wide range of teaching and research activities, what justifies these activities is always the way they feed back, directly or indirectly, into common life.

2. As with so many topics in political philosophy today, the ideal/nonideal debate begins with John Rawls.⁷ Rawls oxymoronically calls his landmark theory of justice a form of "realistic utopianism."⁸ It is utopian because it is beyond the realm of immediate possibility, but it is realistic because it remains achievable for actual human beings, and hence an appropriate object of hope.

I do not wish to enter into the debate as to whether this middle ground is either too idealized or not idealized enough. What is important here is that Rawls defends his realistic utopianism as a necessary step on the way to more thoroughly realistic nonideal theory. While Rawls sees that value of nonideal theory as self-evident, he sees even his own limited degree of utopianism as something that needs to be defended, and defended in terms of its relationship with the political questions we actually face in the world as it is. Realistic utopianism is justified, he claims, because it provides "the only basis for the systematic grasp of these more pressing problems."⁹

Rawls's claim that successful (semi-)ideal theory is necessary for successful nonideal theory is rather strong. Amartya Sen may be right that it is actually neither necessary nor sufficient, that "the possibility of having an identifiably perfect alternative does not indicate that is necessary, or indeed useful, to refer to it in judging the relative merits of two other alternatives."¹⁰ Even if Sen is correct, however, there are still many ways in which ideal theorizing might be genuinely helpful in improving our realistic political thinking.

For one thing, there is the basic research justification, which correctly observes that it is impossible to predict in advance how a particular piece of ideal theorizing might help guide our choices in the future. What may seem like a utopia today may become the basis of tomorrow's constitution. This unpredictability is at the heart of the justification for basic research across all disciplines, research whose practical impact often becomes clear long after the work is completed.

⁷ For a thorough overview, one to which I owe much of the story outlined more briefly here, see Zofia Stemplowska and Adam Swift, "Ideal and Nonideal Theory," *The Oxford Handbook of Political Philosophy*. Edited by David Estlund. New York: Oxford University Press, 373-390.

⁸ John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999, 4.

⁹ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. Revised Edition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999, 8.

¹⁰ Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice*. London: Allen Lane, 99. See also Sen, "What Do We Want from a Theory of Justice?" *Journal of Philosophy* 103:5 (2006), 215-238.

It is also possible that the importance of ideal to nonideal theorizing may be pedagogic in nature. While a map of utopia might not be of much use guiding our way in the world, drawing up imaginary atlases might help us become better cartographers of more realistic landscapes, and the best way to train our students in the art of navigation might be for them to consider maps of both kinds.

A rather different possibility, however, is that ideal theorizing does nothing to improve actual political decision-making. It might prove entirely useless or, as Charles Mills argues, it might actually be actively deleterious, serving as an ideological distraction from the obvious injustices we see all around us.¹¹

The argument of this essay does not require me to take sides in the debate on whether ideal theory is necessary, useful, useless, or harmful for real-world political thinking, let alone whether it is justified or unjustified on that basis. Rather than choosing sides, I wish only to commend all the participants in this literature for having the right kind of fruitful, professional disagreement. Far from the unfortunate meta-level navel-gazing that so many have complained it to be,¹² this phase of the ideal/nonideal debate is exactly the sort of discussion that all professionals should have about the best means of achieving the socially valuable aims of their vocation.

There is no question that, under the influence of Rawls, arguing about ideals with only a tenuous connection to actual political life became the practice most characteristic of the political-philosophical profession. It is easy for us to take these practices for granted, and to assume that as long as we are diligently following dominant professional norms we have fulfilled our most important moral and civic responsibilities.

Professional ethicists know that this is not the case. Arthur Applbaum, for one, defends what he calls “practice positivism, the idea that the rules of practices, roles and institutions do not have any necessary moral content—they simply are what they are, not what they morally ought to be.” If practice positivism is correct, then an “actor must not defer to the authority of his role obligations without exercising judgment about the legitimacy of the role or of the content of the actions it prescribes.”¹³ While this might not be true of all social roles—the role of a parent, or of a friend may very well have inherent moral content—it is certainly true of most professions. My argument will therefore rest on the narrower grounds of profession positivism. Whatever may be the case with regard to social roles in general, professions do not necessarily carry any moral status. Professions are not of any civic or moral value in themselves, although they may be important social instruments for the realization of civic or moral values.

As a result, some professions should not exist at all. There should be no professional torturers, for example, for moral reasons closely related to the reasons why there should be no amateur torturers. “If our professions were simply institutionalized villainy, the fact that they were

¹¹ Charles W. Mills, “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology,” *Hypatia* 20:3 (2005), 165-184.

¹² The complaints are generally heard off the record, so no citations are available.

¹³ Arthur Isak Applbaum, *Ethics for Adversaries: The Morality of Roles in Public and Professional Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000, 10.

institutions would count for nothing,” Applbaum argues. “But since most of our professions aim at goods and purposes worthy of the commitment of a reflective practitioner, they are not without legitimacy, even when their rules are imperfect. That is why criteria of justified professional dissent and disobedience are needed.”¹⁴

The ideal/nonideal debate, as outlined so far, is a model of the kind of reflective discussion that should take place within all professions. There was a strong sense that the profession of political philosophy functions properly only insofar as it provides an obvious civic and moral good: guidance about how to best deal with the problems faced in actual political life. There was then lively disagreement on whether the dominant means adopted by the profession was an effective means of achieving this good. In the end, although consensus was never achieved, reformed professional practices began to emerge.

Regardless of whether ideal theory is necessary or useful, there is a growing sense that we have been devoting too large a share of our time and energy to it, and could better achieve the purposes of our profession in other ways. If Rawls genuinely believed that ideal theory was justified as a necessary propaedeutic to nonideal theory, Mills wonders, “then why, in the thirty-plus years up to his death, was he still at the beginning? Why was this promised shift of theoretical attention endlessly deferred, not just in his own writings but in the vast majority of his followers?”¹⁵ Since Rawls’s passing, we have therefore seen a rise in a variety of forms of more practically-oriented theorizing, including the anti-moralistic realism of Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss, Jeremy Waldron’s “*political* political theory,” and David Miller’s “political philosophy for earthlings.”¹⁶

At the same time, however, there have also been those attempting to move political philosophy in the opposite direction—those who maintain that Rawls’s version of ideal theory is not idealized enough, that his realistic utopia is too realistic and insufficiently utopian. G. A. Cohen argues that a true theory of justice need not be something that human beings could ever reasonably be expected to achieve. “If justice is, as Justinian said, each person getting her due,” he reasons, “then justice is due her irrespective of the constraints that might make it impossible to give it to her.”¹⁷

At times, Cohen suggests that insufficiently utopian theorizing can have negative effects on practical, nonideal theory. He claims that rejecting an ideal, as an ideal, because it is impossible

¹⁴ Ibid., 259.

¹⁵ Mills, op. cit., p. 179.

¹⁶ For the former, see Bernard Williams, “Realism and Moralism in Political Theory,” in *In the Beginning was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005, 1-18 and Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008. For the latter, see Jeremy Waldron, “*Political* Political Theory: An Inaugural Lecture,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 21:1 (2013), 1-23 and David Miller, “Political Philosophy for Earthlings,” in *Justice for Earthlings: Essays in Political Philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 16-39.

¹⁷ G. A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008, 252-3.

to achieve, “leads to confusion, and confusion generates disordered practice: there are contexts where the ideal *can* be advanced, but is pushed forward less resolutely than it might be, because of a lack of clarity about what the ideal is.”¹⁸ This view has also been defended by Adam Swift, who argues that “we need fundamental, context-independent normative philosophical claims to guide political action even in nonideal circumstances.”¹⁹

Their argument, regardless of its plausibility, would then be a contribution to the debate that I have already identified and lauded. The goal remains the same: to improve our practical, nonutopian political thinking. It is then argued that the best means of achieving this goal is a distinction between political philosophy proper, which sets out principles regardless of their attainability, and applied political theory, which takes these principles and uses them, together with empirical evidence concerning social feasibility, to develop what Cohen calls “rules of regulation.”²⁰ It is then an open question whether pure political philosophy and applied political theory are to be treated as separate professions—as Cohen sometimes seems to suggest—or whether they are best pursued as components of a single career. Either way, the two practices remain interdependent. While political theory relies on pure philosophy for its grounding in fact-insensitive moral principles, political philosophy depends on applied theory for the real world impact that ultimately justifies its existence as a profession.

While I do not wish to evaluate the tenability of this argument as a piece of professional ethics, it is important to realize that whether it is actually Cohen’s view remains ambiguous.²¹ While some of what he says might be taken to support this position, Cohen also explicitly rejects the view that “the entire *raison d’être* of moral, social, and political philosophy and theory... is to guide our actual practice.” For Cohen, a concern with guiding practical action sometimes appears to be a wholly optional element of the vocation. “One may or may not care about practice,” he says, “but one may also care about justice, as such, one may be interested in what it is, even if one does not care about practice at all. Political philosophy is, in my view, a branch of philosophy, not a branch of normative social technology.”²² As with any subfield of the discipline, political philosophy, *qua* philosophy, is about “what we should think, even when what we should think makes no practical difference.”²³

In everyday discussions of justice, it is typically assumed that justice is something worth pursuing in practice. If Cohen is right that justice should not directly govern our actual civic life, then this raises the question of why we should devote our time to the study of justice at all. “Wouldn’t it be more important,” Miller asks, “to investigate the values and principles, whatever they are, that can guide our common life?”²⁴ Miller’s question only makes sense, however, if we accept the assumption that has guided the ideal/nonideal debate from Rawls onward: that the task

¹⁸ Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009, 80.

¹⁹ Adam Swift, “The Value of Philosophy in Nonideal Circumstances,” *Social Theory and Practice* 34:3 (2008), 363-387, 363.

²⁰ Cohen, 2008, *op. cit.*, 253. For another defense of a roughly similar thesis, see Estlund, “Human Nature and the Limits (If Any) of Political Philosophy,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 39:3 (2011), 208-237.

²¹ On Cohen’s ambiguity here, see Stears, *op. cit.*, 333.

²² Cohen, 2008, *op. cit.*, 306. The view rejected here is ascribed, not to Swift, but an unpublished manuscript by Rodney Pfeffer.

²³ G.A. Cohen, “Fact and Principles,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 31:3 (2003), 211-245, 243.

²⁴ Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

of political theory is to guide political practice. Defenders of Cohenite utopianism therefore have reason to undermine what was once an unquestioned commitment at the basis of our professional ethics.

3. In order to address objections like Miller's, Estlund sets out to refute the view he calls "practicalism," the view that "only practical political theory has value."²⁵ Like Cohen before him, Estlund devotes considerable effort to arguing "that the truth about justice is not constrained by considerations of the likelihood of success in realizing it." Unlike Cohen, however, he also devotes considerable effort to addressing what he sees as the separate question of "whether it would be valuable or important to understand the truth about justice," under the assumption that this truth has no practical implications.²⁶

While Rawls argues that our political aspirations should be realistic enough to give us hope of achieving them, Estlund defends both the truth and the value of what he calls "hopeless theory." The "sad name" is deliberate. While Estlund acknowledges that "the possibilities for unanticipated moral achievement in the future are suggested by history to be vast, and highly idealistic political theory might find some justification there," he actually wants to "defend political theory that defends standards even though they will *not* be met, and even if we know this for sure."²⁷

What is most striking about Estlund's defense of this kind of theorizing are the sheer number of arguments that he chooses to forego. Neither the basic research nor the pedagogic justifications are, for Estlund, adequate accounts of the value of hopeless utopianism. Estlund wants some account that can establish that a particular instance of hopeless theory that he stipulates will have no positive practical value whatsoever—however indirect or attenuated—nonetheless possesses important value of some other kind.

The mere fact that a given political theory has no *positive* practical value, however, does not mean that it may not have a *negative* practical impact. Hopeless theory is positively dangerous, Estlund admits. True but nonetheless unachievable ideals might mislead some into taking "actions in their pursuit, and this might be bad. Actions in pursuit of what will never be achieved can be wasteful or even disastrous."²⁸ Since utopias often consist of interdependent components, piecemeal reforms are likely to do more harm than good; here, as is often the case, an achievable second-best state is often not the member of the feasibly achievable set intuitively closest to the impossible ideal.²⁹ Theorists who discover that pursuit of justice is hopeless therefore have a strong professional responsibility to warn against its pursuit; a failure to do so is utopian in a way that Estlund admits is worth fearing. What is remarkable, however, is that

²⁵ Estlund, "What Good is it? Unrealistic Political Theory and the Value of Intellectual Work," *Analyse und Kritik* 2 (2011), 395-416, 396.

²⁶ Estlund 2014, op. cit., 115.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 118. Emphasis in original.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

²⁹ Estlund draws here on R. G. Lipsey and K. J. Lancaster "The General Theory of the Second Best," *Review of Economic Studies* 24:1 (1956), 11-33. For an overview of the topic, see Geoffrey Brennan and Philip Pettit, "The Feasibility Issue," in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy*. Edited by Frank Jackson and Michael Smith. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, 258-279, especially 261.

Estlund maintains that, despite these dangers, hopeless political theory might not only be true, but also valuable.

It is not, however, the mere fact that a hopeless theory is true that makes it valuable. The world is filled with countless, largely valueless truths we might come to know, both political-philosophical and otherwise. The telephone book, for example, contains a lifetime supply of extremely unimportant truths. The value of truth itself gives us no reason to privilege impractical political-philosophical truths over any other kind, including, among others, hopeful or practical political-philosophical truths—perhaps truths about Cohen’s so-called rules of regulation. Estlund never denies that these, too, qualify as truths; he describes his stance as “inclusive,” maintaining that “there are moral truths and insights of both kinds, and neither enterprise is based on some kind of mistake.”³⁰

Unlike the truths listed in the phone book, of course, political-philosophical truths (hopeless or otherwise) are not easily accessible to all. It might be argued that, like many forms of intellectual activity, hopelessly utopian theorizing can prove valuable due to the virtuosity being displayed. Yet Estlund does not think that this could be the grounds for the value of hopeless theory. Consider, he says, a case in which virtuosity is displayed in the course of an arbitrary task—perhaps memorizing, rather than looking up, all those unimportant truths listed in the phone book. Any task of sufficient difficulty, however silly or pointless, “might be accomplished in a way that shows a kind of greatness... but it would not be any great achievement. The value of non-practical intellectual work is not exhausted by virtuosity of any kind.”³¹

Given the sheer number of possible arguments in its favor that Estlund rejects, it might be thought that establishing the value of hopeless, utopian political theory is itself hopeless. At times, it seems like the best Estlund can do is try to shift the burden of proof to the practicalist position. “Just because nothing can be offered in support of a claim,” he says, “does not show that the value claim is false.”³²

Yet even if we assume that practicalism is false—that hopeless, impractical political theory is nonetheless not valueless—this still cannot give us an ethical basis for our vocational choices. Just as it is filled with valueless truths, the world is also filled to overflowing with intrinsically and instrumentally valuable entities.³³ It might be the case that something genuinely has value, but that any reason to pursue this value is always overridden by the more pressing need to pursue other values. As a result, the knowledge that something has value gives us only a *prima facie* reason for pursuing, promoting or respecting it—a reason which might easily be trumped by other reasons. If we have a choice between structuring our profession around the pursuit of useless truths and the pursuit of useful ones, the practical value of the latter would intuitively seem to outweigh the impractical value of the former, however real both kinds of value might be.

The best argument that Estlund has at his disposal, however, is that hopeless, utopian political theory would not be the only kind of professional activity that might seem to be disallowed by

³⁰ Estlund 2014, *op. cit.*, 123.

³¹ Estlund 2011, *op. cit.*, 413.

³² *Ibid.*, 404.

³³ For an argument that all entities have at least a tiny bit of intrinsic value, see Scott A. Davison, *On the Intrinsic Value of Everything*. New York: Continuum, 2012.

arguments along these lines. Consider, he urges us, the vocation of so-called “‘pure mathematics,’ those areas of the subject that are pursued for reasons other than any practical value they might turn out to have.”³⁴ While Estlund does not have a full account of the value of this sort of work, and “while their own view of the matter does not settle it, many mathematicians themselves are quite explicit that what motivates their research is not any dimly or clearly suspected practical value, but curiosity itself.”³⁵ Both hopelessly utopian political theorists and pure mathematicians have a sense that they are engaged in important work that is nonetheless of no practical value. While he cannot offer a full justification of either of these intuitions, Estlund does conclude with “the tentative proposal that it is valuable to come to understand something that is, itself, important.”³⁶

4. There is good reason, however, to treat what both mathematicians and political theorists say about the value of their work with a significant degree of skepticism. In any division of labor, it is useful to have vocations assigned to those who value the work required for its own sake. All professions, from mathematics and political philosophy to accountancy and firefighting, involve activities that can be valued in this way. Whatever one’s initial, instrumental justification for pursuing a particular profession, genuine vocations take on what is often experienced as a kind of intrinsic value for their practitioners. When a vocational division of labor is operating effectively, the unintended result of individuals following their idiosyncratic visions of intrinsic value is that instrumentally valuable social tasks are performed primarily by those who are best equipped to perform them, those who value these activities intrinsically.

Estlund acknowledges that the basic research or pedagogic justifications may be what justifies most forms of academic work when viewed from the outside, but that those involved in this work do not experience it as practically motivated. In his terms, while the *internal* motivation for this sort of work is pure curiosity about important truths, the *external* motivation might still be indirectly practical.³⁷

I do not wish to enter into the thorny metaethical question of whether we can be systematically mistaken about the actual value of entities, whether those who are internally motivated to pursue some form of knowledge for its own sake can be said to be mistaken in doing so, or whether this knowledge acquires intrinsic value solely by virtue of being intrinsically valued. Regardless, we need not insist that professionals are incorrect to value their work intrinsically to note that their reasons for doing so, however valid, are not widely shared—in Rawlsian lingo, they are not *public* reasons. In a diverse, democratic society, claims on scarce public resources can only be legitimately justified through public reasons, not through reasons acceptable only to those who share the comprehensive worldviews that bind closed communities.

³⁴ Estlund, 2011, op. cit., 405.

³⁵ Estlund 2014, 133. Estlund cites David Hilbert, “Mathematical Problems: Lecture Delivered Before the International Congress of Mathematicians at Paris,” (1900), Available Online at <http://aleph0.clarku.edu/~djoyce/hilbert/problems.html> and G. H. Hardy, “A Mathematician’s Apology” (1940). Published online by the University of Alberta Mathematical Sciences Society (2005) at <http://www.math.ualberta.ca/mss>.

³⁶ Estlund 2011, op. cit., 395.

³⁷ Ibid., 407.

Like any form of community, professional communities can diminish our concern for those left outside their boundaries, carving the world into favored in-groups and disfavored outgroups. In an era defined by identity politics, it is important to realize, as K. Anthony Appiah notes, that not just “men, gays, Americans and Catholics” are identity groups, but also “butlers, hairdressers and philosophers.”³⁸ Identity groups inevitably create forms of solidarity among members. This may be entirely morally forgivable; Appiah argues that “neutrality among identities, far from being an attractive moral ideal, is barely intelligible for us as individuals.”³⁹

Professionals, like members of any identity group, have a strong motivation to favor their fellow professionals over the general public—and perhaps even some genuine moral justification for doing so. Like some, but not all, other identity groups, many professions also have a reasonable case to make for a right to police themselves, to enforce their own internal norms. “Teachers, doctors, and bankers, for example,” Appiah observes, “all do many things where it is very hard or expensive for outsiders to keep an eye on how conscientious they are being.”⁴⁰

Sometimes, formal institutions of professional self-governance are required to allow professions this autonomy. Often, however, self-governance arises spontaneously in the form of what Appiah calls an *honor world*. “People in an honor world automatically regard those who meet its codes with respect and those who breach them with contempt,” Appiah explains. “Because these responses are automatic, the system is, in effect, extremely cheap to maintain. It only requires us to respond in ways we are naturally inclined to respond anyway.”⁴¹ What makes honor cheap and automatic, however, also makes it hard to subject to reflective scrutiny.

This is a particular problem when honor worlds are exclusionary, since this exclusion is likely to be morally problematic and unlikely to change unless someone within the honor world somehow becomes concerned about those outside of it, and tries to make it a matter of honor within the group to treat those outside it in morally appropriate ways. Reformers of this sort always face the possibility of dishonor within the group, of marginalization and even expulsion. Since the group is defined, at least in part, by privileging the interests and values of insiders over outsiders, those who wish to privilege outsiders over insiders will be accused of disloyalty. What the self-hating race-traitor is for the ethnically-defined identity group, the amateurish philistine is for a vocation like political theory.

The result of all this is that self-governing professional communities are highly likely to develop norms that privilege the internal, intrinsic values of the profession over the external, instrumental values that provide public reasons for these professional practices. This is why professional self-reflection and self-criticism of the sort that Appiah describes is so important—and so often lacking. If left to its own devices, a profession is likely to downplay or ignore the external

³⁸ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007, 65.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁴⁰ Appiah, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2010, 194.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

purposes that the vocation was initially designed to serve, and perhaps even begin governing the profession in ways that are publically unjustifiable.

It is not easy to step back from one's everyday professional practices and question their larger social purpose, especially when the profession is as complex as that of political theory. It is not merely that, as Stears observes, "political theorists seeking to discover the purpose of their vocation... are faced with a multitude of decisions, relating to a series of interlocking issues: logical, epistemological, empirical and strategic."⁴² (Note that ethical issues are, characteristically, left off the list.) It is rather that all of these issues cannot be addressed in a morally and politically adequate way from the internal perspective natural to fully socialized members of the profession. We have to look at political theory from the outside, to perform what Mills describes as "an operation of Brechtian defamiliarization, estrangement." Try, he urges us, to see through the eyes of someone

...coming to formal academic ethical theory and political philosophy for the first time. Forget, in other words, all the articles and monographs and introductory texts you have read over the years and that may have socialized you into thinking that this is how normative theory should be done... Wouldn't your spontaneous reaction be: *How in God's name could anybody think that this is the appropriate way to do ethics?* ... [T]his spontaneous reaction, rather than naïve or jejune, is in fact the correct one.⁴³

If the defamiliarization that Mills calls for proves too difficult, just think of the last time you admitted to a stranger at a party what you do for a living. Odds are, upon being introduced to a professional political theorist, the average stranger tries to strike up a conversation about politics. You may have awkwardly tried to change the subject, explaining that what you study isn't primaries and referenda, but first principles and utopian ideals. In doing so, you were evading what your fellow party-goer reasonably believed to be the very purpose of your vocation. If you don't study politics, this outsider might ask, why are you considered a political philosopher?

Estlund is happy to grant that, if the correct theory of liberty, justice, or equality has no implications for political practice, it might very well be a mistake to classify those who study these concepts as *political* philosophers, a matter which he sees as entirely semantic.⁴⁴ That it is the job of political philosophers to think about politics is not an empty semantic claim, however; it is an important and meaningful statement of professional ethics.⁴⁵ We have been assigned a subject matter in the academic division of labor, which in turn is part of the larger social division of labor. The precise assignment appropriate to each vocation is, as I have already said, rightly the subject of debate and disagreement—both within and outside the vocation in question. We

⁴² Stears, op. cit., 327.

⁴³ Mills, op. cit., 169-170.

⁴⁴ Estlund 2014, op. cit., p. 131.

⁴⁵ Many have made this claim before, and quite rightly so, without realizing that they were talking about the ethics of our profession. Edward Hall's contribution to this volume is an example.

must be careful, however, not to privilege the perspective and values of those within over those without.

5. Of course, it is still entirely possible that our new friend at the party is mistaken to believe that political theorists have a special responsibility to think about what outsiders can recognize as political questions. For one thing, this may not be the kind of job that can be assigned to a particular profession in the first place.

In the early modern era, many thought that the genuine good of national defense was better pursued by a citizen militia than by a professional standing army. Plenty of people today think that there shouldn't be any professional politicians, but only citizen-officials. And even if a given activity should not be conducted by amateur citizens, that doesn't mean that the professions which pursue it are best left as they are. Neither hair styling nor surgery nor dentistry should be done by just anybody, but that is not argument for the profession of the barber-surgeon as it was practiced for most of European history. Barbering, dentistry and surgery are better divided into three separate professions. Should the present-day profession of political philosophy be similarly divided, perhaps separating what Cohen would consider pure philosophy from what he would consider applied theory? Even if the former of these activities is best left to professionals, perhaps the latter should be considered the responsibility of all citizens in a functioning democracy.

This, roughly, is why Swift refuses to condemn political philosophers for failing to guide political practice. He argues that when we insist on the priority of real-world politics over utopian ideals we are "making a judgment about the importance of that particular purpose, not a claim about the fundamental character of the discipline."⁴⁶ It is striking, he says,

...that we are less likely to criticize violinists, say, than political philosophers, for failing to provide justice-promoting guidance, as if being interested in identifying truths about justice meant that one was more rather than less culpable for failing to tell us how to bring it about... I share the frustration felt by many who complain that not enough work has been done to show what the truths identified by epistemologists of justice imply for those concerned with the practical task of making the world less unjust. But I find it hard to feel more impatient with political philosophers than with those who show no interest in justice at all.⁴⁷

It is certainly true that all democratic citizens, not just political philosophers, have a responsibility to help make the world less unjust. And it is also true that political philosophy, as a vocation, remains very close to the kind of discussions of justice and other values that all of us engage in avocationally. Waldron observes that there is a "basic continuity between political theory and civic discourse,"⁴⁸ that "it is a mistake to regard our thinking and arguing in political

⁴⁶ Swift, *op. cit.*, 364.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 367.

⁴⁸ Waldron, "What Plato Would Allow," *Nomos XXXVIII: Theory and Practice*. Edited by Ian Shapiro and J.W. DeCew New York: New York University Press, 1995, 138-178, 147. I would like to thank

philosophy as *qualitatively different* from that of a citizen-participant in politics.” It is “simply conscientious civic discussion without a deadline.”⁴⁹ And while Waldron’s vision of the profession is often contrasted with Rawls’s, Rawls similarly sees his realistic utopianism as a contribution to public discourse. The kind of idealizations and abstractions characteristic of Rawlsian political philosophy are merely “a way of continuing public discussion when shared understandings of less generality have broken down.”⁵⁰

Rather than absolving us of any special professional obligations, the fact that the professional activities of political theorists are (or ought to be) continuous with ordinary civic discourse only helps us to better identify exactly where those obligations lie. As Swift himself acknowledges, co-authoring here with Stuart White, a political philosopher is “trained in particular skills – the making of careful distinctions, an understanding of how to assess and examine arguments about values, arguments for and against political principles” that make her “specially equipped to help her fellow citizens make their political choices.”⁵¹ While Swift and White acknowledge “it may be naïve to expect a philosophically acute citizenry – or even philosophically acute politicians – some raising of the quality of political argument, at all stages in the policymaking process is not unrealistic. And the political theorist is the person trained to contribute to that enterprise.”⁵²

Given the sad state of public political discourse today, it is understandable that political philosophers might want to retreat into worlds of their own imagining. Hopelessly utopian political theory has regularly been compared to the popular genres of fantasy and science fiction,⁵³ which are famous for providing a refuge for awkward adolescents rendered miserable by the painful realities of quotidian existence.

To be fair, however, Estlund is correct that hopelessly utopian political theory is, strictly speaking, still about the real world. Demanding that people live up to hopelessly utopian standards, regardless of the fact that they never will, “is not the same as assuming anything false about the facts... It does not say: if people were better, this is what would be required. It says that this is what is required, and the requirement includes within its scope people being better than they will be.”⁵⁴ However much an escape it would provide, Estlund actually rejects fantastic or science-fictional political theories about “the most defensible principles of justice that could be devised on the arbitrary supposition that the earth contained only one species and one gender, or that the earth was flat and infinite in size.”⁵⁵

What this fails to recognize is that it is a fact about the world that we are not morally perfect, and never will be, even if we ought to be. While it might be interesting to ask how a morally perfect species of beings would organize their political life, such an activity is relevantly the same as

Robert Lamb for sharing an unpublished manuscript on this subject which, despite our disagreements, has helped clarify my thinking on the matter immeasurably.

⁴⁹ Waldron 1995, op. cit., 148.

⁵⁰ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, 44.

⁵¹ Adam Swift and Stuart White, “Political Theory, Social Science, and Real Politics,” in *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches*. Edited by David Leopold and Marc Stears. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, 49-69, 54.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 54.

⁵³ See, for example, Jacob Levy’s contribution to the present volume.

⁵⁴ Estlund 2014, op. cit., 128.

⁵⁵ Estlund 2011, op. cit., 413.

asking how a single-gendered or immortal species would do so. The main difference is that while most of us have no desire to be genderless, and we may or may not pine for immortality, we ought all regret that we are not morally better than we are. In this respect, while much of what purports to be political philosophy may actually be fantasy or science fiction, Cohen and Estlund's particular brand of phi-fi also fits into another literary genre: what Miller calls political philosophy as lamentation.⁵⁶ It is a sad reflection on our fallen nature that, as Augustine writes, "true justice... does not exist other than in the commonwealth whose Founder and Ruler is Christ."⁵⁷ It is therefore to be lamented—with sackcloth and ashes, with great moaning and gnashing of teeth—that no earthly city is close enough to achieving justice that it would be worth our while to try to bring it closer.

As bad as things may be, however, now is not yet the time for Augustinian lamentation. Rome has not yet completely fallen to the barbarians; the flames of their torches have not yet engulfed the city.⁵⁸ We have not even reached the point at which the social structures designed to defend the city have broken down, the point at which citizens must rely on the strength of their own swords and the carrying-capacity of their own buckets. The army still stands, the firefighters are still on call, even some political theorists are still doing their jobs. Not all, but some, and if I am doing my job correctly here, there is every reason to hope that more will be joining them shortly.

⁵⁶ Miller, "A Tale of Two Cities; or, Political Philosophy as Lamentation," in Miller, op. cit., 228-249.

⁵⁷ Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*. II:21. Edited and Translated by R. W. Dyson. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 80.

⁵⁸ At the time of composition, the barbarians were merely in the process of seizing control of one of the two main American political parties, but their victory was not yet complete.