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Book Review: Michael Weber and Kevin Vallier, eds., Political Utopias: Contemporary Debates

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The question of the true nature of justice, whether as a conventional product of human action and human limitations or as a universal ideal, is one that has inspired philosophical debate since Plato. In this volume a number of scholars wrestle with this question. They ask whether justice should be utopian, focused solely on the ideal, or whether just must be realist (or realistic), taking into account the constraints of contemporary human existence. As the editors note in their introduction, it should come as no great shock that the answer cannot rest comfortably and completely in either of these binary choices. But as in all great debates in philosophy, reaching a final answer to the question becomes much less important than the argument itself.

The works in this anthology could be described as less about theories of justice and more concerned with theories about theories of justice. But this doesn't mean that the contributors do not provide insight into how ideal or nonideal theories of justice could be employed to critique and challenge the real problems facing us today.

To get full value from this text the reader will need to be familiar with recent debates in political philosophy about the nature of justice and how best to theorize about justice. One should also be familiar with John Rawls's famous theory of justice and various critiques of that theory. The reader should also be aware of Rawls's theory of a well-ordered society as a "realistic utopia" discussed in his late work The Law of Peoples (1999) and with his overall philosophical project laid out in A Theory of Justice (1971) and Political Liberalism (1993; rev. ed. 2005).

In the opening essay of the volume, building off work by David Estlund, Laura Valentini posits a distinction between "Utopophobia" and "Factophobia." She sees a conflict between those philosophers (Utopophobes, realists, nonidealists) who fear becoming trapped by dangerously idealistic visions and who "problematically compromise normative principles in order to accommodate empirical realities" and those (Factophobes, ideal theorists) who "elaborate normative principles under deeply counterfactual assumptions" (10). This conflict has made debates about justice messy because each of the two positions sees the other as fundamentally misguided and liable to lead to dangerous outcomes if applied. Ideal theorists, in their hostility to the existing imperfect world, would force reality to meet their theories, come what may. In contrast, realists give themselves no position from which to challenge existing injustices and simply ratify the status quo (15–16).

Valentini also provides an excellent overview of the requirements of a theory of justice. She provides the reader with a clear delineation of the difference between normative and evaluative theories. Finally, and I believe most usefully for utopian scholarship, she discusses the important question of "Ought implies can" (23ff.). She notes that how one interprets this statement is linked to the fundamental question of human nature. In the utopian sense this idea suggests that things ought to be done because they are right and good and they can be done given sufficient desire or will within a community. Valentini supports this view, saying, "We should

take human nature as definitive of the limits of possibility and adopt an optimistic stance of what those limits are. In other words, the burden of proof of showing that something morally desirable is in fact impossible falls on the skeptic. . . . [W]e should not be afraid of theorizing under assumptions that appear highly unlikely" (31).

In his chapter, David Estlund considers the role of justice in a community without moral faults. Estlund calls this "prime justice." I found this chapter to be one of the more interesting in this book for utopians, since utopias seem to start at this situation. The concessions utopian theorists are willing to make to moral failings, if any, are critical to utopia design. Estlund wants to start speculation about justice from this ideal position and then work toward realism (44–45). For Estlund all concessions to moral failings that lead to lowered expectations for justice are dangerous and must be resisted. This is not, he insists, utopian, except in the sense that maintaining high expectations is utopian. After all, "what is justice for the flawless might be justice for the flawed" (49). He sums up his argument in clearly utopian terms, saying that "humanity's moral failures do not preclude successes that are complete and flawless, possibly even awesome, under the morally unfortunate circumstances we find, and perhaps even place ourselves in" (55).

Robert B. Talisse echoes this sentiment. He asks whether nonideal theories of justice can guide action. His answer suggests that ideal theories and idealism have a critical place in motivating political change. He says that "in order to be action guiding, a theory of justice must include an idealist component. To phrase things a little more dramatically, my conclusion is that nonidealist theories cannot guide action" (57). Idealism allows us to "consider justice from a perspective outside of the contingencies of our present condition" (70). Without some ideal of justice to strive for, nonideal theories will only marginally change the present. As Blain Neufeld says, "The basic structure of a well-ordered society, then, constitutes a just end-state toward which citizens' reforms ultimately should aim, as well as providing the citizens of a non-well-ordered society with a tool for identifying which of the unjust elements of their society's basic structure are the most serious, thereby facilitating priority setting" (78). This allows citizens to move toward a "realistically utopian version of their society" (87). To attain this goal Pablo Gilabert believes that political activists must avoid "naïve idealism and conservative realism." He suggests what he calls a "dynamic approach" to justice that shows sensitivity to the differing constraints on successful action that exist in every situation (chapter 5). Of course, this approach leaves an open question: When does flexibility mean success, and when does it mean sacrificing key principles for limited gains?

Attempts to discover and apply the correct principles of justice raise questions that challenge idealist assumptions. One example lies in the difficulties in determining the legitimacy of political institutions. Alexander Guerrero suggests that since all government, even the most perfect one we could imagine, requires some coercion, we must have some method of determining and justifying when "trespass on individual autonomy" (136) is acceptable and when it is not. This problem has reared its head time and time again in utopian thought. To address this, Guerrero claims that contextual realities render ideal theories of justice untenable. He says, "The work of recommending or rejecting particular kinds of political systems or

institutions on legitimacy grounds must be done only with a robust understanding of local social problems and how the systems operate in particular societies" (150). David Wiens takes this point even further, claiming that there is no place for ideal theory in a constrained world and that our ability to prioritize goods and goals will also be faced with the limits imposed by existing contexts. For Wiens "there are no fundamental directive principles—such principles are fundamentally constraint relative. Our obligations are thus always specified by reference to a particular set of feasible alternatives." Ideal theories of justice can only work in some nonexistent and impossible "society of angels" (171). Gerald Gaus and Keith Hankins echo this idea, suggesting that the pursuit of justice in any society should be conceptualized as a "rugged landscape" in which peaks and valleys hide any final goal. In pursuing a just society, however defined, we are not climbing Mount Fuji, where the goal is always in sight (181–91). They see this as a warning against idealization and caution that "in rugged landscapes . . . close and better do not march hand-in-hand, and as the appalling consequences of the great . . . social experiment of the twentieth century, communism, [have] shown us, the landscape we confront is decidedly rugged" (191).

How to think and talk about justice provides another important point of dispute. Danielle Wenner takes on the question of deliberative democracy, often seen as a solution to the problem of majority rule (or majority tyranny). Deliberative democracy's supporters see this method as allowing the full expression of diverse community preferences, leading to a just consensus among all interested parties. Wenner takes issue with this view, seeing it as an expression of idealism that ignores contextual issues such as adaptive preferences. These are preferences that are "not autonomously or reflectively formed" (207) and might be considered as created under some sort of duress that even the subject might not be aware of. She also notes problems of epistemic and linguistic injustice in which members of traditionally subordinated groups might be at a disadvantage in situations of deliberation and decision making based on deliberation (208–11). Rosa Terlazzo echoes many of these concerns and expands the question to ask how deliberative democracy especially fails to address the interests of children. Wenner and Terlazzo remind utopian scholars not to presume that a supposedly inclusive and open-ended method leads automatically to just and fair outcomes.

Nonidealist theories of justice make claims that are similar to those advanced by the "realist" school of international politics. Since we don't live in a perfect world, we must be clearheaded and take the world as it is. Anyone who fails to see that is derided as mush-headed and quite possibly dangerously delusional. Of course, taking the world as it is means accepting injustice as normal and the status quo as a fact. It seems clear to me that idealism is an absolute necessity for those who seek change. Finding the right balance between idealism and nonidealism finally becomes a subjective choice based on a reasoned calculation of ends and means. But surrendering idealism at the start seems to guarantee failure in any enterprise aiming at any change we might describe as utopian.

What value does this debate hold for utopian scholars? First, we must recognize that questions of justice are central to the utopian enterprise. Second, the use of ideal standards of justice as a means of critique and as part of a platform of social, economic, and political change

has long been a part of the arsenal of revolutionaries, whether or not we can call them utopian. Rigorous definitions of justice and an understanding of contemporary philosophical debates can only improve the quality of work in our field. However, the reader should be warned that a good portion of the text is given over to intramural debates among political philosophers that are not easily grasped by the nonspecialist (and to be honest are not particularly interesting). That said, a careful reading of this text, backed up with some knowledge of the larger issues and key thinkers in the debate, will provide useful insights.