

# Realism about Political Philosophy

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NICHOLAS RESCHER

First, an important distinction. Realism in politics is a position urging modest expectations regarding what political activity can achieve: it stresses the limited efficacy of political measures in realizing desired political objectives. By contrast, realism about political theory is a position urging modest expectations regarding what political theory can achieve: it stresses the limited efficacy of political generalization in enhancing our understanding of political phenomena. The aim of the present discussion is to substantiate this second mode of realism. Accordingly, it calls into question the sort of idealism that looks not just to the removal of imperfections but to the attainment of perfection, for these two goals are far from being one and the same.

Political philosophy all too commonly exhibits a certain utopian penchant for determining generally benign sociopolitical arrangements and addressing the ways and means of arriving at such an outcome. But serious obstacles impede the realization of this desideratum—impediments whose basis is not merely practical but more fundamentally theoretical.

The rational management of political affairs is usually held to aim at promoting the general good. However, for this promotion to hold it would be necessary to determine at the outset just wherein “the general good” consists. But regrettably there is good reason to view this task as in principle unachievable. And the grounds for this unrealizability are not far to seek, for the ideal of “the general good” raises so many questions that the entire matter becomes rationally intractable.

The prime difficulty here is that when we try to get a grip on the conception of “the general good,” the venture runs like sand between our fingers. Here we meet with more questions than answers:

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- Is “the general good” a matter of satisfying felt *wants* or real *needs*? (Think here of Oliver Cromwell’s invocation: “Not what they want but what’s good for them.”)
- Who decides? Who is to be the arbiter of what is for “the general good”? (The public at large? The voters? Their elected representatives? The “experts”? Some “enlightened” individual?)
- What factors are determinative of “the general good”? (The greatest amount of satisfaction? The least amount of dissatisfaction? An intermediate average? And is the matter not just one of satisfaction/dissatisfaction, but are degrees of each also to be taken into account?)
- How are the various different component contributions to “the general good” (i.e., the standard of living, life expectancy, mental health, public order, the diffusion of knowledge, virtuous behavior, and so on) to be balanced against each other in reaching an overall result?

The problem is not just that such questions are difficult to resolve but rather that it lies in the nature of things that there is not and cannot be any determinate “solution” for them that is able to induce rational assent. The idea that such questions admit of an impersonally correct and compelling resolution is simply false.

Suppose, for example, that enhancing the general good is understood to call for “the abolition of inequality.” This understanding immediately raises the question “Inequality in point of what?” Obviously not in point of health or of talent. At best and most, it would be economic inequality—inequality, say, in point of annual purchasing power. But would even this be made to work? Suppose X uses this purchasing power to make an actual purchase—say, of a new car. The moment he drives it home, its market value declines by some 15 percent. Does a commitment to equality call for making up this decline to X? And what if the things he buys were something that is used up as he consumes it—say, a bottle of vintage champagne? To maintain equality of purchasing power, should the community be called upon to make up this depletion to him, too? And the same sort of thing holds for all of the other relevant issues of public policy—“improving the standard of living,” “reducing the crime rate,” and so on.

Arrangements in matters of public policy and process invariably redound to the favor and advantage (or disfavor and disadvantage) of particular groups. But the idea that general principles are at work that can guide such arrangements in point of their conducting to (or deporting for) “the general good” is simply an illusion because the very idea at issue here is unraveled by its utopia unrealism. There just is no theoretically optimal course of practical proceedings here—no available optimization on the basis of general principles of political criteriology issuing in the one-size-fits-all resolution.

The reality is that what constitutes “the general good” is part of the problem and not an instrumentality for its solution; it is something the political system must decide rather than discover as a preexisting reality. Any acceptable resolution will have to be worked out among those concerned on the basis of their views of the costs and benefits.

And here a resolution can be evaluated on the scale of foolish or wise, sensible or ill advised, but not on the scale of correct or incorrect.

Purely theoretical analysis of public policies simply cannot impartially adjudicate just what is involved with “the general good.” It can indeed bring the problems and difficulties into clearer view, but it is simply unable to provide constructive guidance to their resolution. It can highlight false starts and dead ends but cannot reach its distinction along such a *via negativa*. For there is, in fact, no purely rational, theoretically cogent way of resolving such issues. What is in question here is something that goes above and beyond the reach of plausible general principles. Of course, there are measures that benefit some without harming others—orderly queues at bus stops or right turns on red when traffic permits, for example. But they are the exception rather than the rule, and the idea that public affairs can be managed by such measures alone is pie in the sky.

The very idea that “the general good” is a realizable condition of things in the public sphere is in the final analysis an illusion. It commits the fallacy of illicit presumption in assuming that there is some identifiable item that answers to this idea. But although there indeed are merit-enhancing considerations and demerit-increasing considerations, there is no coherent way of blending them into one overarching optimal condition. The point is simply that there is really no way to make sense of such components of “the general good,” “the abolition of inequality,” or “people’s due rights” that admits of unproblematic application and implementation.

To be sure, there are many negativities whose presence is at odds with a healthy state of the body politic. But their concurrent diminution runs into the same problem of incompatibility and conflict. The harsh reality of it is that individually meritorious aims are often reciprocally incompatible, exhibiting a linkage of complementarity where more of one good can be secured only at the expense of less of another good. Systems designed to exclude ineligibles cannot avoid realizing some eligibles. Systems designed to lessen impoverishment will increase fraudulence as well. Often as not, accentuating the positive engenders ampler scope for the negative. And effecting a viable compromise is something that cannot be achieved by rational analysis—the issue of “the proper balance” is something that cannot be *discovered* but rather something that must be *decided*. Political theory and reflection cannot here achieve what only political practice itself can deliver.

The service that political philosophy and theory can render to our effort to understand and assess political developments “on the ground” is extremely limited, and we would do well to entertain modest expectations in this regard. Improvements in the management of political affairs simply cannot be realized by the “sweet reasonableness” of an appeal to theoretical analysis and rational insight. They are, instead, something that requires the acquiescence to resolutions that—whatever be their theoretical merits or flaws—people will accept because the only *available* alternatives embody conditions that are yet worse. In political matters of practice and theory alike, accepting imperfect arrangements is not a character defect but an inevitability.

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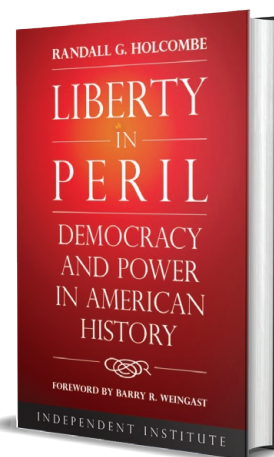
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