Laurence, Ben. *Agents of Change: Political Philosophy in Practice*.
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Ben Laurence's *Agents of Change* is a welcome contribution to ongoing methodological debates about the relation between political philosophy, political practice, and ideal theories of justice. Laurence notes the historical pedigree of these debates—Aristotle, in particular, plays a starring role—but primarily focuses on three Rawlsian theses that have preoccupied the discipline over the past few decades. These are, first, that political philosophy should be practical in the sense that it helps guide efforts to reform an unjust status quo; second, that political philosophy therefore requires ideal theory, which plays the "teleological" function of providing a practical goal that informs the pursuit of justice; and, third, that ideal theory should employ the "compliance" assumption that, in the (ideally) just society, all fully comply with the demands of justice. Laurence defends the first two theses but criticizes the third, embracing the practicality of political philosophy and the teleological conception of ideal theory while rejecting the compliance conception. He thus positions himself between "practicalists" who reject all forms of ideal theory as insufficiently practical, and "antipracticalists" who deny that political philosophy need be practically relevant in the first place.

Agents of Change is an interesting, insightful, and very helpful book. Rather than arguing for counter-intuitive conclusions, Laurence seeks reconciliation. He concedes as much as he can to his interlocutors, aiming for middle grounds that capture kernels of truth in competing positions. As a result, Laurence excels at explaining the reasoning and motivation behind even those views he rejects, making the book especially valuable for newcomers; I highly recommend it to anyone wishing to get up to speed. But Laurence also provides much to consider for those already engaged in these debates. Although I was unpersuaded by his defense of the teleological conception of ideal theory, his arguments yield important insights regardless—for example, concerning the need to address proposals for reform to particular "agents of change," rather than to a generic "we." Laurence's discussion of antipracticalism, and especially David Estlund's brand of it, is also excellent.

In what follows, however, I set aside Laurence's engagement with other thinkers, and focus on his positive account of political philosophy. Laurence structures his discussion by first distinguishing the teleological and compliance conceptions of ideal theory (ch. 1), before defending the teleological conception (chs. 2-4), rejecting the compliance conception (ch. 5), criticizing antipracticalism (ch. 6), and concluding (ch. 7). But I will proceed in a different order, to separate Laurence's views concerning political philosophy generally from his views about ideal theory specifically. With respect to the former, Laurence defends three main claims:

1) *Political Philosophy is about Justice* (ch. 1): Justice, claims Laurence, is "[t]he primary concern of political philosophy" (19) and its "basic concept" (62). Laurence interprets justice capaciously; for example, he characterizes both democratic theory (158) and political liberalism (163) as concerning justice (and not, say, legitimacy). But he denies that justice is "the whole of morality" (22n.8, 220-221). Rather, justice has three central "marks": it is second-personal (it is owed *by* someone *to* someone), it is stringent (with "practical primacy" over other considerations), and it concerns institutions (21).

2) *Political Philosophy is Essentially Practical* (chs. 2, 6, 7): On Laurence's view, political philosophy is a practical enterprise in the Aristotelian sense that it aims at action: "The philosopher reasons about justice not to contemplate it, but to see it done" (52). Laurence cashes out the Aristotelian distinction between practical and theoretical reason in modern terms by appeal to disciplines' conceptual subject matters: "judgments of justice articulate reasons for action," and this distinguishes political philosophy from theoretical disciplines like arithmetic, whose

"basic concepts are not practical concepts" (62). This also explains why it is an "internal norm" of political philosophy that it should be practically relevant (208).

3) *Political Philosophy Addresses Particular Agents* (ch. 4): Perhaps the highlight of the book is Laurence's argument that political philosophers must address their proposals for action to particular "agents of change," rather than to a generic "we" (as in, "*we* ought to implement such-and-such reforms"). The basic problem with the "we" approach is that it is highly indeterminate who it is meant to address, and attempts to render it determinate—perhaps it addresses "all citizens" or the government, say—prove implausible. For example, if some injustice is maintained by the "corporate community" or the government, who resist attempts to ameliorate it, then it doesn't make much sense to address proposals for reform to "all citizens" (which includes the corporate community) or to the government (111-112). Instead, proposals should be tailored to particular agents—in this case, to suitable agents of change (say, members of the labor movement) who are well-positioned to overcome corporate or governmental resistance. Laurence suggests that agents of change are suitable when proposals are feasible for them, when they are (or could become) motivated to enact them, and when their doing so would be normatively appropriate; he further argues that suitable agents are often victims of injustice (116-124). However, since requiring victims to remedy injustice is often overdemanding, complying with proposals is often "permissible but not required" (140).

Summing up: Laurence holds that political philosophy is essentially practical in the sense that it issues proposals to particular agents about how to pursue justice. This is a broadly attractive vision that Laurence elegantly develops. But I have some concerns about the details.

First, Laurence justifies his focus on justice by appeal to its stringency or priority over other values, such as legitimacy and beneficence. He defends this priority with a quick argument: "Justice is itself not one value to be balanced against another, but rather a view about the proper ordering of different values to meet our claims on one another" (25). Yet, by Laurence's own lights, justice only concerns the *second-personal* domain of morality. So suppose we follow Laurence in seeing justice as the overarching value of that domain, and so as including other second-personal values like legitimacy—something "political realists" stridently reject (e.g. Bernard Williams, *In The Beginning was the Deed* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005]; Matthew Sleat, "Justice and Legitimacy in Contemporary Liberal Thought: A Critique," *Social Theory and Practice* 41 [2015]: 230-252). Even still, this doesn't show that justice has priority over values beyond the second-personal domain, such as beneficence, which Laurence explicitly distinguishes from justice (21). Laurence therefore provides no answer to those who deny the priority of justice over beneficence, and so argue that beneficence should feature more prominently in political philosophy (e.g., Allen Buchanan, "Justice and Charity," *Ethics* 97 [1987]: 558-575; Robert E. Goodin, "Duties of Charity, Duties of Justice," *Political Studies* 65 [2017]: 268-283; Jacob Barrett, "Social Beneficence," GPI Working Paper no. 11-2022 [2022]: 1-39).

Second, while I share Laurence's enthusiasm for practical relevance, I worry about his attempt to defend political philosophy's practicality by appeal to its conceptual subject matter or "internal norms." The trouble is that there seems to be a gap in Laurence's argument from his premise that political philosophy is *about* reasons to his conclusion that it must be practically relevant in the sense that it addresses actual agents. After all, it is consistent with political philosophy being about reasons that it is sometimes about the reasons of hypothetical agents in hypothetical circumstances. Where, then, does the internal norm requiring practical relevance come from? Yet perhaps Laurence has another argument available to him. In his final paragraph, Laurence suggests we interpret him as issuing "proposals" for action to political philosophers, much like other proposals issued to other "agents of change" (214). Seen this way, we can evaluate his methodological proposals like any others: in terms of whether they identify suitable agents to enact positive change. And, plausibly, the proposal

that political philosophers do practically important work fits this bill—suggesting an alternative argument for making political philosophy more practical that doesn't rely on its internal norms.

Third, Laurence's argument that political philosophy must address proposals to particular agents is compelling, and will certainly make me reluctant to reach for the generic "we" in my own work—at least without some defense. But one defense does seem available. Namely, much as it is sometimes helpful to provide generalizable advice that applies widely rather than tailoring one's advice to one person (say, when writing an advice column), it is sometimes helpful to generate widely applicable proposals that many potential agents might adopt rather than tailoring one's proposals to particular agents. Indeed, having a good stock of widely applicable proposals seems important, since this provides potential agents of change with proposals ready to grab "off the shelf" (or at least to serve as starting points for reflection and advocacy), especially since it is often surprising what proposals get uptake by which agents. So, if we interpret Laurence as suggesting a strict methodological constraint of only making proposals once we have identified suitable agents of change, this might problematically limit the availability of such proposals. Still, Laurence makes a strong case that, ultimately, proposals must apply to some agent of change if they are to be practically relevant, and that this should inform our theorizing.

Overall, then, Laurence's view of political philosophy as practical and addressed to particular agents is plausible in broad outline, even if we might quibble with some of the details (especially its narrow focus on justice). But where does ideal theory fit in? Here, Laurence makes two further claims:

4) *Issuing Proposals Requires Ideal Theory* (ch. 3): Laurence embraces a "teleological" conception of ideal theory, on which it plays an essential role justifying and explaining proposals for reform. This role has both "dynamic" and "immanent" dimensions. Dynamically, ideal theory provides a conception of an (ideally) just society that tells agents *what* they should pursue as a long-term goal. Immanently, ideal theory informs *how* agents should pursue justice, for example, how they should navigate tradeoffs between pursuing the ideal and achieving justice in the short term, and what means they may permissibly take. In this sense, ideal theory has "practical explanatory priority" in our theorizing about justice (99-101). Yet Laurence denies another common ideal-theoretic claim: that ideal theory therefore enjoys methodological priority. The "starting points of inquiry" are the judgments of *injustice* we acquire through our "sense of justice, understood as power of practical reason that we exercise in everyday political life" (53-54). Ideal theory begins with these judgments and shapes them into a unified picture of the just society and the principles characterizing it, guiding our further reflections through its dynamic and immanent roles (55-70).

5) *Ideal Theory Doesn't Assume Compliance* (ch. 5): Laurence also denies a second common view among ideal theorists: that, when theorizing about the just society, we should assume everyone in it complies with the demands of justice. Laurence's central analogy is that trying to understand justice without reference to non-compliance is like trying to understand health without reference to illness. Properly understanding health requires us to refer to the immune system, which (among other things) prevents illnesses from getting too severe and restores us to full health after we are sick. Likewise, a proper understanding of justice should include the various ways it is bound up in non-compliance, for example, its implications for how we can enforce justice against would-be non-compliers and resist or defend ourselves against them (147-153). We should therefore think of the just society more like a society with an "immune system"—that is, with mechanisms preventing it from departing *too far* from full compliance—than as a society in which non-compliance never occurs.

Laurence's discussion of ideal theory is fascinating, and both his explanation of the disparate motivations behind the teleological and compliance conceptions of ideal theory (27-40) and his critique of the compliance conception (ch. 5) are helpful and compelling. Yet while Laurence paints a neat picture of how political philosophy works on the teleological conception, I found myself unpersuaded by his arguments in favor of it. As I see it, Laurence faces several significant objections.

Take first Laurence's claim that ideal theory "dynamically" guides agents by providing a long-term target for reform. Laurence acknowledges that for ideal theory to play this role, we must identify not only abstract principles of justice, but also concrete institutions that would realize them (86-87). Yet he doesn't address the *epistemic* objection standardly following this observation: that, in light of our epistemic limitations, we can't figure out which institutions would be ideal or what steps to take toward them, at least with sufficient confidence to warrant their pursuit (e.g., Gerald Gaus, *The Tyranny of the Ideal* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016], ch. 2; Jacob Barrett "Social Reform in a Complex World," *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 17 [2020]: 181-198). This is a strange and uncharacteristic oversight, especially since Laurence agrees we face such epistemic limitations, even going so far as to suggest the need for institutional experimentation to figure out which institutions would be ideal (87, 191, 198). Why, then, doesn't Laurence further acknowledge that (or consider whether) we can better achieve justice by working out better mechanisms of engaging in institutional experimentation and gathering relevant feedback, than by trying to work out steps toward our current, hazy best guess about what institutions this experimentation might eventually identify as ideal (e.g., John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* [New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1927]; Jacob Barrett, "Social Reform in a Complex World," *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy* 17 [2019]: 103-132)?

Turn next to Laurence's defense of ideal theory's "immanent" role. Laurence's discussion of this role is interesting and rich; I cannot do it justice here. But it relies on two main arguments. The first is that ideal theory is needed to guide agents through tradeoffs they face between pursuing the ideal as a long-term goal and satisfying present claims of injustice or better realizing justice in the short term. Here, the underlying idea seems to be that we can only explain why the status quo is unjust, or why some arrangements are less just than others, by reference to the ideal: something being unjust involves it deviating from the ideal, and it being less just involves it deviating further or less closely approximating it (88-89). Yet while Laurence briefly acknowledges "second-best problems" (90)—namely, that rankings of how far societies deviate from the ideal don't always serve as plausible rankings of their justice—he doesn't address the worry that such problems may undermine the very idea of explaining injustice in terms of deviations from the ideal (e.g., Robert E. Goodin, "Political Ideals and Political Practice," *British Journal of Political Science* 25 [1995]: 37-56; David Wiens, "The General Theory of Second Best is More General Than You Think," *Philosophers' Imprint* 20 [2020]: 1-26). Nor does he address the *redundancy* objection that even if we can measure deviations from the ideal in a way that yields plausible evaluations of justice, the ideal is ultimately redundant in this exercise. For example, our identification of the ideal might rely on an appeal to certain basic values which we can use to make these evaluations directly (David Wiens, "Against Ideal Guidance," *Journal of Politics* 77 [2015]: 433-446). Or perhaps measuring deviations from the ideal requires us to identify not only the ideal but also some criterion for measuring deviations from it, and once we have specified this deviation measure, it can do all the work (Jacob Barrett, "Deviating from the Ideal," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* [forthcoming]).

Laurence's second argument in favor of ideal theory's "immanent role" is that it informs not only what *ends* agents should pursue, but also what *means* they may permissibly take. His basic idea is that the permissibility of certain means—for example, those employing violence—depends on the severity of the injustice agents are combatting, where the severity of something's injustice depends in turn on how much less just it is than the ideal (76-83). This is an interesting and novel position, but it yields some counterintuitive results. The problem is that, on this view, you should come to judge the

status quo more severely unjust, and so violence more often permissible, not only if you learn more about the status quo's unjust features (for example, that it contains more discrimination or inequality), but also if you come to endorse a more lofty conception of the ideal (for example, because you previously thought the ideal society would merely realize Rawls's principles, but you now think it would be even more just if, in addition, everyone lives in maximal bliss). But it is implausible that whether we should accept a lofty vision of the ideal on which it is way better than the status quo, or a modest vision on which it is only somewhat better, determines (all else equal) whether violence is permissible here and now. To avoid this result, we must either deny that the severity of injustice determines which means are permissible (perhaps what actually matters is how much more just our reform would make things), or else interpret severity differently: for example, injustice rather than justice may be conceptually primary, with judgments of severity flowing directly from our conception of injustice rather than from comparisons with any ideal (e.g., David Schmidtz, "Nonideal Theory: What It Is and What It Needs to Be," *Ethics* 121 [2011]: 772-796). Either account seems at least as plausible as Laurence's, but neither vindicates the immanent role of ideal theory.

So Laurence has more work to do if he wishes to convince critics to embrace the teleological conception of ideal theory, or perhaps even his focus on justice itself. But while I have primarily played such a critic here, we must not lose sight of the bigger picture. *Agents of Change* is a valuable addition to ongoing methodological debates in political philosophy, which I recommend to newcomers and participants alike. It significantly advances the debate and our understanding of the dialectical terrain, offers various helpful proposals about how to do practically relevant political philosophy, and, for these reasons among others, serves as a model of how to do good work on methodology in political philosophy.

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