CRITICAL COMMENTS

How should we think about the relation between principles and agency?

Pablo Gilabert*

Philosophy Department, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

In this article, I will reflect on Lea Ypi’s methodological contribution in her wonderful book *Global Justice and Avant-Garde Political Agency*.

Ypi addresses the important and underexplored issue of the relation between normative principles and political agency. She proposes a ‘dialectical approach’ to normative political theory, which she contrasts with ‘ideal’ and ‘non-ideal’ approaches, arguing that the first does a better job in articulating progressive guidelines for political agents seeking to achieve justice. Ypi presents a general framework that applies, but is not restricted to, global justice. In what follows, I first reconstruct what I take to be Ypi’s key conceptual and substantive moves and then raise some critical observations and questions. The central polemical contentions are that Ypi’s arguments do not succeed at defeating the importance of ideal theory for activist political theory and practice, and that we need an account of normative political reasoning that articulates more explicitly the relation between considerations of moral desirability and political feasibility.

KEY CONCEPTS AND CLAIMS

Concepts

Ypi introduces three sets of conceptual characterizations. The first concerns the concept of ‘activist political theory.’ This is a kind of political theory that ‘is concerned not merely with interpreting the world but also with changing it’ (40). It includes three dimensions: It is a ‘normative theory that is, at the same time, [Di] fundamentally appropriate, [Dii] politically effective, and [Diii]
motivationally sustainable’ (40). Furthermore, an activist political theory is essentially linked to the action of certain political agents: it interacts with the political practices of ‘avant-garde political agents.’ These are agents proposing novel ways to interpret and change the political context in which they act, and an activist political theory helps them articulate their principles and strategies of action (65, 66).

Second, Ypi introduces a contrast between ‘ideal’ and ‘non-ideal’ approaches to normative political theory. Ypi acknowledges that there are many versions of each approach. She presents a stylized characterization of each that seeks to capture their central features. These approaches are contrasted primarily in terms of their aims and methods (36–9, 50). Regarding aims, ideal theories are ‘truth-seeking,’ attempting to identify true principles of justice and picture what a maximally just society fulfilling them would look like. Non-ideal approaches, on the other hand, seek to be ‘action-guiding,’ to orient political agents to achieve improvements in the here and now (even if they fall short of achieving a perfectly just society). Regarding methods, ideal approaches rely on abstractions or idealizations, and they are not constrained by facts about political agency in the real world. In contrast, non-ideal approaches seek to avoid abstractions and idealizations, and start by providing an interpretation of the function and purpose of existing practices and/or institutions. There is a further contrast regarding sequencing of tasks. Ideal approaches proceed in two stages (the first being either temporally or normatively prior to the second): (1) identification of principles of justice, and (2) exploration of their implementations in specific, real political contexts (36 and 186 n. 1). In contrast, non-ideal approaches involve (in some versions) three stages: (1) a pre-interpretive identification of practices and institutions under examination; (2) an interpretive identification of the functions and purposes of those practices and institutions; and (3) a post-interpretive identification of normative principles for the regulation of the institutions and practices (52).

Finally, Ypi introduces the ‘dialectical approach’ to normative political theory. It consists in ‘the method of learning from trial, failure, and success’ (40). In the case of activist political theory, it helps identify and test successive accounts of the pairing of normative principles and political agency (40). The dialectical approach provides a way to evaluate and compare competing political theories that present alternative accounts of the function and purposes of political institutions and practices. The theories are tested on the basis of their comparative success in performing three tasks (44). The task of ‘diagnosis’ involves identifying existing political conflicts, their causes, and the concerns and commitments of those involved in them. The task of ‘innovation’ involves the proposal of new interpretations of the conflicts and principles guiding a response to them that preserve the normative benefits of earlier proposals while avoiding their failures. Finally, the task of ‘heuristics’ involves raising ‘new (normative and empirical) questions concerning the development of the
institutions reformed according to the proposals from the second task. Comparative success, in the dialectical analysis, is captured as follows:

If new interpretations manage to satisfy the three criteria (and for as long as they do so), they are likely to succeed in rendering the commitments implicit in them politically effective and motivationally sustainable. (45)

Claims

Using the concepts just reconstructed, Ypi makes three key substantive claims. The first is that ideal and non-ideal approaches face some serious challenges from the point of view of an activist political theory. Ideal approaches cannot really tell us how principles illuminate political practice. They risk being indeterminate, irrelevant, and distortive (45–50). They may fail to present specific guidelines for action, or they may identify guidelines resulting from ideal thought-experiments that have no bearing on real-world circumstances that are quite different, or they may apply those guidelines to the real world without noticing that there are important competing considerations relevant to that world that should be taken into account (and which would require a different practical judgment as to how to act). On the other hand, non-ideal approaches risk status quo bias. They lack uncontroversial criteria for selecting the practices whose normative commitments they seek to identify, and they fail to provide a satisfactory internal account of the normative authority of their interpretation of the selected practices’ functions and purposes (50–6).

Ypi’s second claim is that the dialectical approach retains the advantages and avoids the pitfalls of the other two approaches, and is thus best for articulating the reasoning of activist political theorists. Unlike ideal approaches, the dialectical approach connects properly with the interpretation of existing political institutions and practices, and thus helps orient action in the here and now. Through its diagnostic, innovative, and heuristic tasks, the dialectical approach involves a direct engagement with existing political agency. But such an engagement avoids the status quo bias of non-ideal approaches. This is because the dialectical approach provides a diagnosis of existing institutions and practices that focuses on conflict besides consensus among the agents involved, and proceeds to articulate innovative interpretations and progressive heuristics that potentially take agents well beyond their current social circumstances. In summary, the dialectical approach is best because it frames political reasoning so that it includes a proper connection with both political agency and normative principles.

The third key claim is that the dialectical approach is helpful for current debates on global justice: in particular, it helps in arbitrating the debate between ‘cosmopolitanism’ and ‘statism.’ Ypi proceeds to argue in the rest of the book that the dialectical approach helps us retain the demanding ideal of moral equality of cosmopolitanism
and to see how it may shape the historically changing dynamics of associative political institutions and practices within modern states.

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

I find Ypi’s discussion very illuminating. I share her project of mediating between ideal and non-ideal approaches in order to articulate the tasks of an activist political theory. And I think that the proposed dialectical approach goes quite far in achieving this. There is so much in Ypi’s account that I agree with, and learnt from, that it is hard to come up with critical remarks. But I have some significant worries, which may hopefully provoke Ypi to develop her views further.

Worries regarding the critique of ideal approaches

A general worry that I have regarding Ypi’s critique of ideal approaches is that the three charges of indeterminacy, irrelevance, and distortion are not fully distinguished and explained. Do they necessarily apply simultaneously? That seems to me unlikely. More specifically, I think that the charge of irrelevance is independent from the charge of indeterminacy, and that it fails. Consider the thought-experiment that pictures two autarchic or completely unrelated societies (47, 48), one of which is materially better off than the other, and asks whether there are any duties of justice to transfer resources from the first to the second. This scenario is imaginary, and it is not supposed to represent an existing state of affairs. But it seems to me that our intuitive reactions to it could have serious consequences for real-world politics. For example, if we think that there would be valid egalitarian demands in that scenario (because we think, say, that persons should have equal opportunities to live flourishing lives regardless of where the natural lottery determines their birthplace to be), then we would recognize that we have reason to approach the ongoing process of globalization in certain ways. We would, for example, acknowledge a pro tanto duty to generate global associations that foster distributive equality (besides sufficiency, or non-exploitation and non-domination). This is not a fully determinate result (something which ideal approaches do not seek at the level of principle, of course), because further evaluative and empirical considerations will have to be taken into account to reach overall situational judgments. But we will come to the task of reaching those judgments with a sharply different attitude, one that includes distributive equality as a desideratum. Thus, the general claim that ideal approaches’ thought-experiments are irrelevant is false. They can help us identify some of our fundamental normative commitments, and these in turn can shape our response to real situations.

Ypi mentions the standard alleged virtues of thought-experiments: they help isolate normative variables, they help control biased reactions, and they may identify possible future scenarios and thus help us respond lucidly to them when they arise. It seems to me that these virtues are in fact quite important, and that they do warrant
the use of thought-experiments as one among the many resources we can draw on when engaging in normative reasoning. I agree with Ypi that we have to take into account that real-world situations may involve empirical and normative variables not captured by certain thought-experiments, and that these, if important, should be incorporated into all-things-considered judgments about what to do. But I don’t think that most proponents of the thought-experiments would deny this. Furthermore, they could say that we could render the experiments more relevant to current practice by including in them scenarios that track the conflicting values and other important axes of appraisal that apply to current situations. I would also like to suggest that the normative thought-experiments of ideal theory may in some ways be similar to the artistic experiments of the avant-gardes in areas such as theater, poetry, and painting that Ypi justly celebrates in the last chapter of her book: they may both involve intellectual activities in which abstraction and experimental variation help agents gain critical distance from their circumstances and foster their ability to re-engage with them with more lucidity. In this sense, the dilemmas constructed by some philosophers are not that different from those constructed in, say, some of Bertolt Brecht’s plays.3

Worries regarding the dialectical approach

A first worry about the dialectical approach is that it is not clear in what exactly it is supposed to identify trials, failures, and successes. The method is said to be able to identify changes in theory and practice that involve ‘progress,’ more ‘emancipatory’ outlooks, etc. (57–60, 63, 65). But it is not clear how it really accounts for historical improvement in political theories and practices with respect to their moral desirability in addition to (and in relation to) their political feasibility. Comparative assessments concerning diagnosis, innovation, and heuristics are important, but they seem to account for the accessibility of certain proposals and for the stability of their achievement over time. This concerns dimensions Dii and Diii of an activist political theory (i.e. political feasibility). Dimension Di (i.e. moral desirability) is not clearly articulated. If we just focus on Dii and Diii some morally obnoxious theories and practices may pass muster, at least for some time. (Consider the Nazi movement, which involved a very effective and motivationally strong form of political avant-gardism.) If the assessments concerning diagnosis, innovation, and heuristic do involve a moral evaluative component (and Ypi wants that component to be present), we need more clarity as to how exactly it operates and is tested. Thus, for example, Ypi says that an activist political theorist would consider whether certain proposals are ‘morally problematic’ (63). But Ypi does not explain how such a moral appraisal works. I agree that starting our analysis by considering situations of ‘crisis’ or ‘conflict’ in which different agents disagree is helpful in avoiding a conventionalist and status quo biased view of existing political situations. But, from the point of view of moral assessment this is far from sufficient: we need to explain why one of the agents involved in the disagreement is correct (if any).
It is important to notice that dimensions Dii-Diii and Di may come apart. Some normative principles may not be identified at the diagnostic stage, or developed through innovations, because they are not as a matter of fact invoked by political agents in the context (which doesn’t imply that they should not be invoked in the context). And some normative commitments that are invoked in the context may not be morally reasonable. Without a more explicit account of the normative dimension, assessment based on the dialectical approach may yield false positives and false negatives. Must a normative principle be false if nobody (not even the avant-garde) embraces it in a conflictive situation? Is it true when and because some politically efficacious agents pursue it? The answers to these questions must be ‘No.’ The dialectical approach needs to account for these intuitions. In its current form it seems to me that it doesn’t.

Thus, it is problematic that Ypi’s dialectical approach takes core normative principles for granted, without giving an account of how they are developed and justified (187 n. 11). Ypi is right that we must explore how normative principles and political agency are combined so that we have a politically effective activist political theory. But we must also explore the issue of the justification of principles. Perhaps the exploration of their relation with political agency is relevant for this task. This leads to the importance of reflective equilibrium (on which more below).

To put the worry in a different way: It is not clear that the dialectical approach is not, or should not be seen as, an applied case of ideal approaches, given that it appears to take the principles from somewhere else. Ideal approaches have an account of how to justify principles. What is the dialectical approach’s account? Is it different?

Or to put the worry in yet another way: We know how Kant, Hegel, and Marx could give us a story about what criteria help us justify claims about historical progress. Kant would talk about the approximation of a rightful condition of maximally consistent external freedom for all human beings; Hegel would talk about the achievement of fuller, more determinate forms of self-consciousness on the part of the Spirit (Geist); and Marx would talk about the development of productive forces and workers’ eventual move from a condition of narrow confinement in the ‘realm of necessity ’to another involving substantive access to the ‘realm of freedom.’ What are the core evaluative criteria in Ypi’s account of success in historical progress? And how are those criteria to be defended?

My second critical point about Ypi’s dialectical approach is that I think that she should not have rejected the method of reflective equilibrium. The dialectical approach in fact relies on intuitions about appropriate principles (as we saw earlier), and it acknowledges that observation of existing practices and the conflicts they include is theory-laden [i.e. shaped by our previous normative commitments, which determine what seems relevant (53)]. It seems to proceed via some sort of coherentist assessment (e.g. sometimes by putting principles aside in view of judgments about particular cases, and sometimes by modifying the latter to fit the former). But that kind of assessment is precisely what the method of reflective equilibrium articulates. Notice that in it, nothing is taken as foundationally fixed. For example, no intuition
has that standing, they are all revisable by looking at their relation with other items in our practical reasoning about what we ought to do. The reflective equilibrium model (in its deliberative version—as opposed to its descriptive⁶) would actually help to make holistic assessments involving the three dimensions of an activist political theory (including Dii, Diii, and Di) in an ongoing way.⁷

I conclude with a question: What is the relation between ‘truth seeking’ and ‘action orientation’ within activist political theory and practice? Might they ever conflict? Avant-gardes have had, historically, a difficult rapport with this relation. Consider the blunders of paternalistic, manipulative, and sacrificial forms of avant-gardist organization and behavior in the history of communist parties. Or consider (focusing on ‘beauty seeking’ in addition to ‘truth seeking’) the often oppressive or devaluing transformation of art into propaganda or political pedagogy. To avoid these pathologies, we need to illuminate the relation between moral desirability and political feasibility in a sharp way. To do this, the practical ethics of avant-gardism must be addressed. I invite Ypi to reflect on this issue, which is a natural follow-up to her uncovering of the important question of the relation between normative principles and political agency in non-ideal circumstances.⁸

I have raised some challenges to Ypi’s methodological views. Ideal theory should not be dismissed, and Ypi’s arguments against the importance of its use fail. This compromises Ypi’s attempt to provide a middle way between ideal and non-ideal theory. Furthermore, ideal theory arguably already plays a role in Ypi’s own dialectical approach, as some of the normative principles used in the latter seem to be taken from some form of the former. Finally, the dialectical approach should be developed further to explicitly account for how considerations of moral desirability contribute, and interact, with considerations of political feasibility in the shaping of the normative political judgments of political agents seeking to change their social world. The method of reflective equilibrium may be helpful in developing a more capacious framework of this kind. Despite these disagreements, I find Ypi’s exploration of the relation between normative principles and political agency immensely fruitful, and indeed sorely needed in the contemporary debate on global justice, which is often disconnected from the ethical dramas of action in the real world. Ypi is the Gramsci of global justice. Antonio Gramsci once taught socialists to explore the cultural and institutional processes through which effective political agency could be properly connected with socialist aspirations in Western societies in which such aspirations seemed to lack enough practical traction.⁹ Lea Ypi is teaching us to engage in a parallel exploration in the case of global justice, asking us to imagine ways in which responsible political agents can act so as to fulfill cosmopolitan ideals of global equality when they seem to be stuck within the narrow limits of their current associative commitments.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I thank Lea Ypi, Catherine Lu, and two anonymous referees for comments on previous versions of this text.
NOTES

1. Lea Ypi, Global Justice and Avant-Garde Political Agency. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Chap. 2. Page numbers in this article refer to this book.

2. The distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory is a flourishing area of contemporary debate in political philosophy. For a lucid survey see Laura Valentini, ‘Ideal vs. Nonideal Theory: A Conceptual Map’, *Philosophy Compass* 7, no. 9 (2012): 654–64.

3. Ypi warns that there is a delicate balance between detachment from, and attunement to, their immediate context that avant-garde artists have to navigate if they want to be both critical and culturally influential (156–60). One could say the same about philosophers deploying thought-experiments and similar techniques. But if this difficulty does not disqualify the political relevance of the former, it does not disqualify the political relevance of the latter either.

4. On page 40, it is suggested that the dialectical approach identifies its principles ‘with the help of ideal theory,’ and that it makes such principles ‘more determinate.’ In other places (e.g. in chapter 5), Ypi works from existing political discourse on global justice, asking, for example, whether the commonly accepted principle of sufficiency might require, instrumentally, international relations that foster equal power for each state. Here, sufficiency is not taken from ideal theory, but from report of current opinion. This way of picking out principles might avoid the alleged problems of ideal theory, but only at the risk of conventionalism and deference to the status quo plaguing non-ideal theories (as Ypi characterizes and criticizes them). We, thus, need clarity about how the identification and justification of ‘fundamentally appropriate’ principles should proceed.

5. ‘The method of reflective equilibrium consists in working back and forth among our considered judgments (some say our “intuitions”) about particular instances or cases, the principles or rules that we believe govern them, and the theoretical considerations that we believe bear on accepting these considered judgments, principles, or rules, revising any of these elements wherever necessary in order to achieve an acceptable coherence among them.’ Norman Daniels, ‘Reflective Equilibrium’, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2011 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta. Accessed 20 May 2013, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/reflective-equilibrium/.

Ypi worries that the method of reflective equilibrium ‘relies heavily on the relevance of intuitions and various assumptions concerning a pre-existing moral sense, making the method more or less reliable depending on whether it is possible to identify a filter that distinguishes genuine moral insight from prejudice’ (188 n. 23).

6. For this distinction see Thomas M. Scanlon, ‘Rawls and Justification’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 139–67. Descriptive reflective equilibrium is focused on reporting coherence within what we already believe. Deliberative reflective equilibrium is focused on identifying what we are to believe (i.e. our coherent normative, rather than merely operative, reasons).

7. We need an integrated articulation of desirability and feasibility at different levels of normative reasoning. In my own account, I suggest that we distinguish between three dimensions of normative political theory: core principles, social implementations of the principles through institutions and practices, and strategies of transition leading us from where we are to the implementations of the second dimension. Each dimension involves a balancing of desirability and feasibility considerations, and we should seek reflective equilibrium amongst all in an ongoing, fallibilistic inquiry. The dialectical approach seems to me helpful to illuminate the feasibility component of this process, but more is needed, I think, to capture its relation to the evaluative component. See Pablo Gilabert, *From Global Poverty to Global Equality. A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), sections 4.3, 7.3, and 8.2. See also Pablo Gilabert, ‘Comparative Assessments
of Justice, Political Feasibility, and Ideal Theory,’ *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 15, no. 1 (2012): 39–56.

8. Ypi does partially address this issue when arguing (in chapters 6 and 7) that the ‘cosmopolitan avant-garde’ should work within the boundaries of democratic politics. But there are different ways of working within those boundaries. We need more clarity on how to think about which are best all things considered (i.e. given an explicit articulation of various considerations of moral desirability and political feasibility).

9. Interestingly, and like Ypi, Gramsci argued that we should start by uncovering the ‘contradictory consciousness’ of agents involved in ongoing social conflicts, and to seek to articulate coherent and reflective normative and empirical theories able to orient them in progressive ways. See Gramsci’s ‘Notes for an Introduction and an Approach to the Study of Philosophy and the History of Culture’, in *The Antonio Gramsci Reader*, ed. David Forgacs (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 324–47, at 333.