

The Value Of Ideals In A Less Than Perfect World

Why policymakers should (not) be idealists in regards to climate change

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Summary

In academic as well as in public debate, there is much discussion on whether or not a focus on ideals is fruitful for making a change in society, especially in regards to policymaking. Ideals can be valuable on a personal, as well as a societal level, but they can also be perceived as naive and unrealistic. In political philosophy, this debate mainly centers around two kinds of theories: ideal theory and non-ideal theory. Both of these theories consider ideals to be useful, but non-ideal theory also acknowledges the importance of a realistic perspective on the world when designing policy. This is important for effective policymaking. One way of getting this realistic perspective is by looking at how feasible a policy is. There are different kinds of feasibility constraints that can help with that, divided into soft and hard constraints. Important is to look further than a black and white view on the feasibility of a policy: a constant weighing between the ideal and reality is necessary for getting to the best possible result. A concrete example of this process can be found when looking at climate change.

Introduction

At the age of fourteen, I stopped eating fish and meat. At that moment my motivations were mostly based on my love for animals and the fact that I did not consider it necessary for animals to suffer so I could have a juicy piece of meat everyday. In the past decade, I have remained a vegetarian and even though I still do not consider animal cruelty a good thing, this is no longer my main motivation. When I started doing research on climate change, I found out that eating meat (and other animal products) is incredibly bad for the environment and that something needs to be changed in the general meat consumption for us to be able to cut down our harmful emissions of greenhouse gases. This strengthens me in my vegetarianism and I keep finding more and more likeminded people in my surroundings. There is a definite movement in (Dutch) society that is more accepting of vegetarianism and veganism, but still only around 4% of Dutch citizens call themselves vegetarians (Schyns 2014). There are multiple questions that I ask myself regularly in this regard: if it is this clear eating animal products is bad, why do people keep doing it? And I know that drinking milk and eating cheese, butter and eggs is bad for the environment, so why do I keep doing it? But also: how can my individual vegetarianism have any impact at all, especially if others do not change their habits? Do we behave a certain way merely to make ourselves feel better? More generally, I ask myself questions on the connection between idealism and reality: why are people idealists if it has little to no effect on the world and why are there so little idealists if change is this necessary?

Answering questions like these is not easy, but ethical theory may be able to help. The philosophical and theoretical practice of ethics is extremely complicated. Every single person has their intuitions on what is wrong and what is right in certain situations: the task for ethicists is to develop a theory that acknowledges these intuitions and at the same time has more scientific value than the intuitive notions. This usually plays out in a general theory that focuses on key values, rules of thumb or other ways to guide thinking and behavior. However, once we need to apply these theories on real life situations, it gets even more complicated: the real world is messy and far from perfect, and so are the

humans living in it. When a situation is in need of ethical reasoning, it is likely not as simple as just applying one of the ethical frameworks to it to find a proper solution. There are many factors, like uncertainties, simple human characteristics and emotions that can stand in the way of a one-on-one translation from theory into practice. The simple fact that people keep eating meat shows that it is not enough to objectively know the right thing to do, other motivations can play a role too in deciding how to act.

Especially for policy makers this can be a tough issue to tackle. Every political problem has many underlying ethical values – from culture, the government, and the public – that need to be incorporated into policy. Translating these values into policy can be problematic, since theory and practice rarely completely overlap. This can mean that policy focused on representing a value in society can lead to the diminishment of the same or another value in another place, or a policy focused on steering peoples' behavior in the right direction can actually lead to the opposite because of psychological aspects of human behavior. In political philosophy and ethics there is therefore a lot of debate on what the right perspective is to deal with injustice and the realization of other values in society. In this thesis, I would therefore like to analyze whether or when it is appropriate for a policymaker to tackle issues surrounding values from an idealist or a more realistic perspective by taking into account the reality of the world. Even though it is also interesting to look at this issue in regards to individuals, I choose to follow the path of policymaking because I think everyone can decide for themselves whether or not they want to put effort into pursuing ideals in their private lives. Since the pressure for policymakers is much higher, because their decisions impact the entire society, I want to see what (extra) issues are to be taken into account at this level of idealism versus realism. My general research question thus is: *What is the value of ideals in a non-ideal world, especially for policymakers and in regards to climate change?*

To find an answer to this question I will start by looking critically at the theory of ideals that can be regarded as the basis of the entire issue: what exactly is an ideal and what are the pros and cons of having them? That way I can make a good assessment of the value of ideals and idealism and consider the reasons we

might need a more realistic perspective. From there I will set out the debate on ideal versus non-ideal theory¹, that can be considered in three different forms. Both ideal and non-ideal theory focus on realizing ideals, with the main difference in the use of idealizations for ideal theory and a more realistic perspective for non-ideal theory. By then, I will have decided that at least some sense of reality needs to be incorporated when making a policy. I will therefore assess the transition from ideal to non-ideal theory in chapter three. After this, in chapter four, I will deepen the discussion on non-ideal theory by arguing for the necessity of feasibility theory. I will be considering different kinds of feasibility constraints policymakers will inevitably need to deal with and discuss how to check whether or not a theory is feasible. To tie in any loose ends I found throughout my research, I will discuss some more critical notes on the use of ideals for policymaking in chapter five. Finally, in the sixth chapter, I will apply my findings on a case study - climate change – to find out whether the theory is sufficient for solving multi-layered problems in society and whether my own research question can be answered this way. In the conclusion I will summarize the foregoing and end with my concluding thoughts in regards to the research question.

¹ There are multiple notations of ideal and non-ideal theory. Some are with capital letters, others

Chapter One: The Theory of Ideals

Ideals are a substantial part of everyday life: some people have ideals regarding their future career – for instance to one day have their own company – some people have ideals in regards to their familial life, like having a large family with many children, and there are people that have ideals in a more abstract way: on how to change something in society. Wanting to battle climate change, for instance by becoming a vegetarian or vegan, is an example of this. This final category of ideals is the one that is most often referred to when talking about ideals, and the one that is most interesting from an ethical and political philosophical perspective. Especially on a political level, these kinds of ideals are very common, and some would say even crucial in realizing a better society for all of us. To make a good assessment of the value of ideals, it is important to have a clear idea on what they are precisely. In political science, as well as in ethics, much has been written on this: even though everyone has an idea on what an ideal is, pinpointing an exact definition is not that easily done. Before describing one of these definitions, and the one I will be using throughout the text, I will first briefly discuss the (original) philosophical interpretation of ideals and idealism. This conception is almost completely different from the ethical or political concept that I endorse in this research and is therefore important to mention to prevent confusion.

1.1 The philosophical ideal

According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy on idealism (Guyer en Horstmann 2018), there have been two fundamental conceptions of idealism in the philosophical tradition. I quote:

1. Something mental (the mind, spirit, reason, will) is the ultimate foundation of all reality, or even exhaustive of reality.
2. Although the existence of something independent of the mind is conceded, everything that we can *know* about this mind-independent “reality” is held to be so permeated by the creative, formative, or constructive activities of the mind (of some kind or other) that all claims

to knowledge must be considered, in some sense, to be a form of self-knowledge”.

The first conception can be described as a metaphysical or ontological form of idealism, which in modern philosophy is mostly characteristic of the thinking of George Berkely. From his perception, idealism is often described as ‘anti-realism’, in the sense that it disputes the mind-independency of the world (Dunham, Grant and Watson 2011). The second conception, better known as formal or epistemological idealism, is best visible in the works of Immanuel Kant, especially in his theory on the distinction between the phenomenal and the transcendental world – the latter being the one independent of reality that we humans can never fully grasp or reach (Guyer en Horstmann 2018).

For both conceptions of philosophical idealism though, it is important to understand that *idealism* does not stem from the word *ideal*, but rather from *idea*. It is therefore that some say Plato is the first idealist: his theory of Ideas proposes a distinction between the essence of a thing and the realization of this essence in the real world (Kenny 2004). An idealist is thus someone who believes in something beyond the real world – the world of Ideas (Dunham, Grant and Watson 2011). There is much more to be said about philosophical idealism – there has been and still is a wide range of philosophers with very different ideas on the subject – but since that is not my main point of interest for this research, I will shift my focus to a more intuitive and ethical conception of idealism.

1.2 The ethical ideal

In ethics or political science, the concept of ideals is something different than the abstract, philosophical one. The ethical ideal better reflects the general intuition or translation of ideals, and is therefore the one that I will be considering for answering my research question. But what exactly is an ideal in this sense? Wibren van der Burg wrote multiple books on ideals and their relevance in different parts of life and science. In *The Importance of Ideals*, he defined ideals as following: “Ideals are best understood as values that are usually not completely realizable. They are usually implicit in legal, moral and political practices and are often difficult to formulate exactly. They function as points of

orientation and can thus play a role in motivating action and in justifying decisions and opinions” (van der Burg 2001, 18). There are two important aspects of this definition. First of all, van der Burg describes ideals as values, making it an ethical concept. The second thing of importance is the idea that ideals are usually not completely realizable, and therefore function as points of orientation, instead of as practical goals. I will explain these two aspects a little further, followed by an assessment of idealism and critique on it.

Values are a rather important part of ethical theory. In short, a value claim is a claim that ascribes a certain worth (or value) to an action, behavior, an attribution, characteristic or anything else (Schroeder 2016). If something is characterized as being *good*, then it can also be said to be of value. Something that is good in itself, and not only because it leads to good things, has intrinsic value. This mostly applies to general concepts such as justice, freedom and equality. Since an ideal usually is a desire to realize such a value, it can be seen as a value in itself as well. Van der Burg describes this as follows: an ideal is a value or a state of affairs that is *of value*. An ideal like a just society refers to a state of affairs that has value, since it realizes moral values such as justice, freedom and equality. Van der Burg further states that values like justice and freedom are themselves ideals too, since they can never be fully realized (van der Burg 2001).

The reason we have these values in the first place is not ‘by accident’. According to van der Burg, values stem from tradition and culture (van der Burg 2001). An easy example is democracy: since this political system was first developed in Ancient Greece, we have come to see it as being the only viable way of governing a country (with of course the necessary critique from time to time), so that now we consider it to be an ideal for all countries in the world to become a democracy. This means that more often than not, ideals are not connected to individuals, but to larger groups of people or even entire countries or societies. The same value can have different translations into practice – the translation of the Christian value of justice is not necessarily the same as justice according to our national laws – but that does not mean that the value is intrinsically different. And while for instance nearly everyone shares the ideal of keeping the world habitable, some people do not stop flying around the world or participating in other heavily polluting activities, while others make it their life

work to stop global warming from happening. According to van der Burg, this does not mean that ideals are purely individual preferences or fantasies, but rather that there is some space for personal interpretation in a common ideal.

The other important aspect of ideals in the definition of van der Burg is their function as an orientation point. In *Ideal Theory in Theory and Practice* (2008) Ingrid Robeyns uses an analogy to explain the function of ideal theory. In my opinion this analogy can be applied to ideals in general as well: "Ideal theory functions as a mythical *Paradise Island*. We have heard wonderful stories about Paradise Island, but no one has ever visited it, and some doubt that it truly exists. We have a few maps that tell us, roughly, where it should be situated, but since it is in the middle of the ocean, far away from all known societies, no one knows *precisely* where it is situated. Yet we dream of going there, and ask ourselves how we could get there, and in which direction we should be moving in order to eventually reach Paradise Island" (Robeyns 2008, 344-345). Translated to ideals this would mean exactly what van der Burg describes in his definition of ideals, namely that they function as points of orientation, rather than as concrete and practical goals. This is important to keep in mind, since, as I will discuss later on, many people consider ideals to be naive because it is often not possible to fully realize an ideal. When using this definition, this issue dissolves itself, since it is never the goal to fully realize the ideal.

1.3 Idealism and idealists

The practice of following ideals can be called idealism, and people that devote their time to idealism are idealists. The most simple and clear-cut definition of idealism is 'faith in and striving towards ideals'. According to van der Burg, there is more to it than that. For him, idealism is a personal effort for ideals with a social character (van der Burg 2001). Both of these aspects are important. Idealism requires a personal effort, an existential bond between the individual and the ideal. This does not mean that the individual needs his entire life to revolve around the ideal; there are different gradations in which people can commit themselves to an ideal. It is also essential that there is a social character to the ideals idealists work for. That means that the content of the ideal is not

just important for personal purposes, but always also for others or in the bigger scale of things.

When considering ideals like a Paradise Island, like Robeyns does, ideals can function as enrichment in two distinct ways, according to van der Burg (van der Burg 2001). First of all on a personal level: if you are oriented on ideals you will forever be challenged to become a better person. If you do not have this aspect of challenge, some people may experience the loss of some quality of life. When people feel existentially connected to certain ideals, the power of motivation in realizing the ideals is especially strong. Being an idealist consists for a rather large part out of disappointment: since it lies in the definition of the word 'ideal' that it is rarely completely realizable, it is inherent you will not always succeed. Once you have found yourself as strongly connected to the ideal that it almost feels like a part of yourself, you will find a way to deal with the disappointment: not continuing the battle means losing a part of your identity. It is thus risky to become an idealist, but it can also have a positive effect on your life, give more meaning to it and make yourself proud of what you did accomplish, even though you will never completely succeed. Being an idealist often also means you belong to a certain group; for many an important desire. Ideals always have a social character too, so there will always be other people fighting for the same goals. Positive aspects of idealism like these only strengthen the position of idealists: striving for certain goals will only get easier if it is also in your own (best) interest to do so.

The other enriching possibility of ideals lies within society: people that fight for ideals show the rest of society that we should not be satisfied with the way things are if there is still room for improvement, which can spark the public and political debate. When this leads to action, actual change can be realized. With an ideal on the horizon, we know which direction to steer in, for instance by creating policies that set concrete goals in the right direction. According to van der Burg one of the reasons some people are skeptical about the use of idealism is that they focus too much on the complete realization of the ideal, which, per definition, is unattainable (van der Burg 2001). Even without complete realization, there is still much to be said for an idealistic perspective: it is still possible to get closer to the ideal, with small or larger steps. Many idealistic

movements book concrete results, that get them closer to their ideals and keeps them going. Consider for instance environmental organization Milieudefensie, that last year set up a campaign to banish palm oil from European products to counteract on deforestation, in which they succeeded, as they state on their website (Milieudefensie 2018). They did not reach their ideal of saving the environment with this campaign, but they got one step closer, improving society one step at the time.

So, apart from the personal gain idealists can experience, there are two important and positive aspects of idealism. First of all, it is possible to achieve concrete results, either small or large. This will help improve society, even though it may not be enough to realize the perfect society – whatever that may be. Second of all, idealism can have an influence on the debate in society: once idealists make others aware of the goals they are striving for, it is likely that more people will start to think and talk about those goals, often resulting in political awareness – and hopefully action.

1.4 A critical outlook

Even though the term ‘ideal’ is in principle a positive one, with different positive effects, many people have a negative connotation with idealism and idealists. Idealism is often associated with fanaticism and naivety, and in the worst cases even with suppression and totalitarianism (van der Burg 2001). This mainly stems from occurrences of idealism in history that turned out badly. Communism is one of the main examples here: what seemed to be a valuable ideal to begin with – equality for everyone – turned out to be one of the biggest failures in history that cost many people their lives. But does that mean the ideal was wrong to begin with, or just that it was badly executed? Or are there other reasons for how it turned out? And does that say anything about the ontological status of idealism in itself? According to van der Burg, the criticism of idealism can be subdivided into five different categories, focused on content, dogmatism, execution, contemporaneity and naivety. I will briefly discuss each of these criticisms and argue whether they are solvable.

The criticism on the content of ideals is a complicated one. Even though ideals can definitely be good, or have positive consequences, it is also undeniably

true that ideals can be bad too (van der Burg 2001). The clearest example of a bad ideal is Hitler's ideal to create a pure, Arian race, which is clearly racist and dangerous too. Not all ideals are so clearly good or bad though, or their true nature may only become clear in hindsight. Critique on idealism or idealists on the basis that it could be a bad one is thus not that strange. To completely ban all forms of idealism because of this seems to be too extreme though: we rather need to be better able to distinguish the good ideals from the bad. I know this is easier said than done, but, following van der Burg, I believe that questioning the ideals in a certain way can definitely help. First of all, it is important to know the origin or source of the ideal. Common origins are religion, science, charismatic leaders and national identity. They all require their own kind of questioning. For religion it is for example important to make sure the ideal is also viable for people outside of this particular faith (or any faith for that matter) and in the case of a charismatic leader with an ideal it is important to question his or her intentions and background. Critical reflection on ideals, idealism or idealists is never a bad thing: in the end, it will hopefully lead to the elimination of the bad ones and prevent ideals from becoming too absolute.

This ties in with the second form of critique aimed at idealism: once people wholeheartedly believe in certain ideals, they often turn into dogmatic ideas that can no longer be subjected to the critical reflection I mentioned before. This becomes dangerous when the followers of this ideal turn oppressive towards dissidents, and possibly even prosecute people, solely on the basis that they do not believe in the same ideal. Preventing this from happening is of utmost importance. Because of this, the critical reflection, from inside and outside of the idealist group, should take place from the beginning. If this does not happen, it is possible the ideals are turned into a complete and closed system that is no longer open to discussion. This is called ideologization, which often leads to negative consequences like fanaticism, intolerance and dogmatism (van der Burg 2001). According to van der Burg, it is no coincidence idealism often leads to that, since ideals suppose a personal commitment. If you put yourself on the line by fighting for an ideal, negative emotions towards people fighting against your ideal are very prevalent. This effect is reinforced because there is no way to adjust ideals once they have become dogmas. It is thus important to be

wary of ideologization and dogmatism and always remain critical towards your own ideals and those of others: do not close your eyes for reality (van der Burg 2001).

Thirdly, idealism is often rejected on the basis that it is executed poorly, with possibly catastrophic consequences. This is what happened in the aforementioned case of communism. However, this critique already shows the link to ideals in itself and possible solutions to the problem as well. The fact that good ideals like equality for everyone can translate into faulty policies and politics does not have much to do with the initial ideal. As van der Burg states: equality for everyone is not reprehensible in itself – at most it is somewhat naive (van der Burg 2001). First of all, because it is not realistic to think it is possible to perfectly manage a society and every person in it, secondly because we should not want that: it just does not correspond with human nature. It is very naive to believe a society will not have individuals with contradicting views, ideas and behaviors. Perfect simply does not exist. Van der Burg believes idealism and utopian thinking do not have to derail in practice: for them to be acceptable and useful, they should be realistic, pluralistic and well balanced.

Another critique on idealism van der Burg came across is that it is just not something that fits into our current society anymore, that the time has gone for idealism. One of the reasons for this is that at least for the Netherlands, most issues have already been tackled and there is thus simply no need for idealism and idealists anymore (van der Burg 2001). Van der Burg does not believe that is the case, and neither do I. Of course we live in a country with a stable political system, where we take care of the weak and keep criminals in line – at least to a certain extent. Most Dutch citizens that are alive right now have never personally experienced war or terrorist attacks and even the wellbeing of animals is pretty much guaranteed in our country. But that does not mean there is no room for improvement. It is hardly possible anymore to solely consider the country you live in: we are all global citizens, dealing with worldwide problems. The one issue that directly shows this is climate change (Singer 2004). It does not matter whether you live in the Netherlands, the United States, in India or in Nigeria (although the issues are more pressing in the latter two countries), everyone is going to be a victim of climate change if we do not change our ways. Considering

the size of this issue and the amount of change needed to deal with it, ideals are not only useful, but in my opinion absolutely necessary in this process. But then there is the final critique on idealism.

The final critique on idealism is the one most closely related to my research question: according to critics, idealism often, usually or always lacks the sense of reality necessary for a useful line of thinking (van der Burg 2001). The argument most often heard is that a focus on ideals will not have an effect anyway or that it strays too far from the real world to be able to change something in it. According to van der Burg, this critique is true in the sense that idealists focus on something that is not (yet) there. But, that is not what the critique is about of course. Idealists often get accused of being negligent of the way the world works and how humans naturally behave. This is especially visible in the issues surrounding climate change, where the problems are extremely sizable and need the cooperation of everyone before they can be solved. An idealist, whether this is a politician, a policymaker or just a socially responsible citizen, is therefore often laughed in their face: you will never get full cooperation, so your effort is useless. This final critique summarizes my intuitive questions on this subject: realists believe idealists take too little consideration of the way the world works, while idealists think realists stray too far from the initial ideal to be able to make a change. I think both sides have a point here, so there need to be found a proper balance between the two. In the next chapter I will therefore take a closer look at this distinction by setting out the debate on ideal and non-ideal theory. Both consider ideals to be the first step in making a change for the better in society, but they differ on the level of reality that needs to be taken into account.

Chapter Two: Ideal Theory

In ethics and political philosophy, there has been a debate going on about how to best realize certain ideals in society, or from which perspective to look at these ideals when trying to make a change. The core of this debate is the role of idealizations in bettering society, and the discussion is often presented from the perspective of the two main camps: propagators of ideal theory and propagators of non-ideal theory. Ideal theory, together with its counterpart non-ideal theory, has its origin in the theories by John Rawls. In perhaps his best-known work, *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls explores the concept of justice and explains his own theory on the concept. This theory falls under the realm of ‘ideal theories’, as he himself acknowledges. For him this means answering the following question: what would justice look like in an ideal world? Rawls explains why he chooses to look at the problem in this way: “The reason for beginning with ideal theory is that it provides, I believe, the only basis for the systematic grasp of these more pressing problems. ... At least, I shall assume that a deeper understanding can be gained in no other way, and that the nature and aims of a perfectly just society is the fundamental part of the theory of justice” (Rawls 1971, 7).

Laura Valentini phrases the pillars of ideal theory as follows: “In this context, ‘ideal theory’ stands for theory designed under two assumptions: (i) all relevant agents comply with the demands of justice applying to them; and (ii) natural and historical conditions are favourable – i.e., society is sufficiently economically and socially developed to realize justice” (Valentini 2012, 655). This means that the situation in which the concept or value (in this case justice) is posed is perfect or idealized. Non-ideal theory, on the other hand, shows more of a bottom-up approach towards societal issues: by acknowledging what is wrong in the world, and wanting to change that, you try to get closer to the perfect society. Valentini then describes the debate on ideal and non-ideal theory as “[The] methodological debate on the proper nature of political philosophy and its ability to guide action in real-world circumstances” (Valentini 2012, 654). First of all, I will look in more detail at idealizations, the essential distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory, before discussing different manifestations of the theories.

2.1 Idealizations

Idealizations are closely related to ideals. The latter can be considered as preceding the former, since to know how to idealize a certain situation it is necessary to know what perfect looks like in this situation. Ideals fulfill this function, as I explained in the previous chapter. Ideal theory therefore always starts with an ideal, on which the theory is then built. In the case of Rawls, this ideal is justice, but other ideals can fulfill the same role. Important to note here is that non-ideal theory is based on ideals too: someone that considers non-ideal theory to be more fruitful than ideal theory believes non-ideal theory to be the better theory for realizing ideals.

Robeyns explains the important role idealizations play in ideal theory: “Most – perhaps even *all* – ideal theories of justice make use of idealizations. In part, this is because idealizations are forms of abstractions, and the very nature of theory construction requires us to use abstractions. Sometimes the use of idealizations is necessary to keep the complexity of the theory within manageable boundaries. By introducing idealizations, we reduce the number of parameters that the theory has to deal with. The problem is similar to the solving of a set of equations in mathematics: if there are too many unknown variables relative to the number of equations, then the set of equations cannot be solved and there is no solution to the problem that the set of equations describes. Something similar takes place in the construction of ideal theories of justice; we reduce the complexity by making some aspects of society and of persons simpler, and thereby often better than in reality. In that way we can focus on the essence and get a grip on the complex set of questions” (Robeyns 2008, 353). In sum, this means that idealizations are simplifications of actual circumstances. Where the actual circumstances are imperfect, idealizations state them as being perfect.

The major difference between ideal and non-ideal theory thus is the fact that ideal theory uses idealizations when drawing up a way to realize an ideal, whereas non-ideal theory does not or not as much. Some people believe ideal theory is the best way to solve issues in society or to create a better world, some think non-ideal theory is the better way to go about this. Much has been written on the two theoretical methods and a rather large part of this literature is from a critical nature. According to Valentini (2012) the debate on (non-)ideal theory

can be regarded from three different perspectives, each with their own distinct questions, arguments and critique. First of all, on whether to focus on an end-state or rather on the transition *an sich*, secondly, there is the debate focused on full compliance and partial compliance, and finally on whether a utopian, or a realistic perspective on values is most appropriate. I will elaborate on these three categories below. Since the majority of the literature on this subject talks about justice, I will often adopt this value as an example, since the same reasoning is applicable to other values as well.

2.2 End-state vs. transitional theory

The first way to look at the debate on ideal versus non-ideal theory is to consider the first kind as theory that focuses on realizing an end-state, and the second on merely facilitating transition (Valentini 2012). Phrased differently: ideal theory is focused on a long term goal, while non-ideal theory is more concerned with how to get to this goal, usually in small or gradual steps. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls considered this distinction, again believing the first to be the important one. He even stated that any non-ideal or in this case transitional theory needs end-state theory to exist: how can you know if the transition is going in the right direction if you do not know what the goal is? Amartya Sen (2006) disagrees with this statement. According to him, it is neither necessary nor sufficient to have an end-state theory when trying to realize a society that is more just than before: no need scrutinizing over what it means for society to be fully just if you can already work on the improvement: a 'comparative theory', he calls this. Again, there is much debate on which of these philosophers is right, or if there may be a solution somewhere in between the two extremes.

The conception of ideals I discussed in the previous chapter makes the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory as respectively end state and transitional theory somewhat problematic. Ideal theory posed as end state theory seems to be actively focused on completely realizing an ideal, but since the ideal in itself is an orientation point, rather than an end goal, focusing on an ideal is per definition transitional. This is mainly a linguistic solution to the issue, so if another definition of ideals or of ideal theory is used, this argumentation may not hold. However, in my opinion much of the critique on ideal theory as

end state theory can be denounced in this way. I therefore prefer considering ideal theory as focused on the ideal in a perfect world, whereas non-ideal theory takes more notion of reality, as the other two perspectives do.

2.3 Full compliance vs. partial compliance theory

The second way of categorizing ideal and non-ideal theory is by considering ideal theory as theory that assumes full compliance, and non-ideal theory as theory that assumes partial compliance (Valentini 2012). Rawls himself acknowledges this distinction in his theory of justice, and picks the former to guide his thinking. In a situation with full compliance, every single person acts the way he should and therefore fulfills his or her duty. An ideal situation regarding justice would thus mean for everyone to always act justly. There is a lot of critique on ideal theory because of this assumption: in real life, there rarely is a situation with full compliance. Even though for instance racial discrimination is forbidden, and has diminished tremendously in the past century, there are still many examples to be found that show only partial compliance to the realization of this value. The critique on ideal theory then is that ideal theory does not present us with the tools to deal with partial compliance: it always assumes full compliance, and at best acknowledges that partial compliance is possible.

Non-ideal theory is better capable of dealing with partial compliance. David Miller (2008) described three broad, duty-focused, options: the first possibility is for everyone to do exactly their fair share, and nothing more. The other options are to do more than your fair share (to compensate for others not doing theirs) or to do less than your fair share (because if others don't, then why should you?). This can be made concrete when looking at climate change. We all know that much should be done to battle climate change. We also know that it is not realistic to believe that everybody will take the necessary steps to solve the issues. So, assuming everybody has the same duty to deal with climate change – for instance to cut down your greenhouse gas emissions below a certain level – what duty do individuals have, knowing that full compliance is not going to happen? You can either make sure you fulfill the duty by cutting down your emissions as much as everybody should, you could cut down your emissions even further to compensate for your neighbor who does nothing to change his

behavior, or you could continue living the same way, since if everyone else can, you can too. Which of these options to pick is up for debate, all of the options have some appeal, but none is obviously the best choice: different situations can call for different strategies.

2.4 Utopian vs. realistic theory

For me, the version of ideal versus non-ideal theory with the largest appeal is the one that compares utopian theory with realistic theory. In short, this means posing ideals in a utopian society or looking at it from a realistic, down to earth, perspective (Valentini 2012). In general this means feasibility constraints in society are acknowledged for the realistic version, while fully utopian theories do not consider feasibility constraints to be of any importance. In her article, Valentini distinguishes the different sides in this debate, posing them against Rawls' initial theory of justice. In the most extreme version of utopian theory, justice is considered to be a completely metaphysical idea or value that has nothing to do with reality and feasibility constraints. Gerald Cohen (2003) is one of the main propagators of this theory. He considers a value such as justice to be similar to a Platonic Idea, with an essence that is completely separate from its manifestation in reality. Important is that the idea of justice is completely abstract and separate from the elaboration of the value in practice and should therefore not be considered as such. According to Cohen, the value can only be considered on a normative level once it is taken together with other values and with facts. From this point of view, political philosophy would be discovering what we should think, instead of what we should do.

The realist group in the debate obviously disagrees with the utopian idea. According to them, it is no use considering an important value like justice from an abstract or even metaphysical point of view, since facts are crucial for dealing with real-world politics. Realists therefore discard the full compliance theory of justice, since it is just not plausible that is ever going to happen. "From a realist perspective, the achievement of perfect justice may be imaginable, but it is not feasible. It is therefore naive, and ineffective, to hold existing societies to account on the basis of such demanding moral standards. The normative priority in politics should not be the achievement of fairness or justice, but rather that of

peace, security, and order” (Valentini 2012, 659).

Interestingly enough, proponents of both sides, the utopians as well as the realists, use their ideas to target the theory of John Rawls: “[F]or the former, Rawls’s account of justice is too realistic and fact-constrained. For the latter, it is excessively idealistic and insufficiently sensitive to the facts that characterize real-world politics” (Valentini 2012, 657). This shows the complexity of the debate, and hints at the idea that the right answer lies somewhere on a scale between black and white, between idealistic and realistic. Since my main goal with this research is to find a proper balance between idealistic and realistic thinking, I will consider the debate mainly from this last perspective. However, since the three perspectives are not always as well distinguishable as I have posed them above, I will discuss aspects from all three of them where they are relevant.

Chapter Three: From Ideal to Non-Ideal

In the previous chapter, I set out the differences between ideal and non-ideal theory. I believe it is clear that ideal theory has value at the theoretical level: by assessing what the world would look like under perfect circumstances you can get a clearer picture of what the goal should be when pursuing an ideal. However, I think it is safe to say that the world we live in is not perfect – far from it even – so it is important to consider how that changes our moral obligations to act on the ideal principle the theory is based on. There is a view in moral philosophy, moral purism or the purist view, that argues that everyone should do their moral duty (whatever that is, depending on the theory) regardless of the situation in the world and the level of compliance. In *Reflections on the Transition from Ideal to Non-Ideal Theory* Michael Phillips (1985) argues why this theory is false.

He discusses three kinds of counterarguments to the purist view: logical, psychological and moral. The logical fallacy in moral purism is the fact that to be able to act on a morality that is appropriate to an ideally structured society, you need to be in a certain social and political setting that makes this possible: you need to for example live in a democratic society to perform the duties of a citizen of a democratic state. This is logically impossible, since the basic assumption is that you should act according to the moral duties under *any* circumstances. Phillips psychological difficulty with the purist view is that 'ought' does not always imply 'can'. People sometimes are jealous, even though they know it is irrational and something they should not feel. It does not matter whether someone had the perfect moral upbringing or lives in the perfect moral world; people are just not always capable of doing what they are supposed to. The final category of difficulties, of the moral kind, seems to be the most interesting one: it is possible that an action seems to be in line with an ideal principle, but in practice undermines this principle. Take for instance the example of climate change: if a law is installed that forbids people from eating meat so greenhouse gas emission is reduced, it is possible people start eating more of some other food (for instance cheese), that actually makes the total amount of emissions higher than before. It is also possible that acting according to an ideal may

prevent a wider realization of that same ideal and there can be situations in which it would not be wrong to act on principles that are in line with the ideal, but where it is at the same time not obligatory to do so.

All three of these issues show that it is not always possible to act as if the world is perfect if it is not perfect – as it hardly ever or even never is. The lesson that can be learned from the foregoing is that it is possible for ideal theory to be good and useful, but that it is useless or at least less useful for functioning as a guide in non-ideal circumstances. This means that to use ideals to effectively make a change in society, we need a transition from ideal to non-ideal theory.

3.1 On the transition

Phillips states that this transition is easier said than done: “Very roughly, Ideal Theory attempts to describe those principles for the design of institutions and the conduct of persons that would be appropriate to a morally and politically ideal order, while Non-Ideal Theory concerns itself with the principles that would be appropriate for these purposes under less perfect conditions. Rawls maintains that although the latter principles are not identical to the former, they are in some important way derived from them. Unfortunately, however, neither Rawls nor any of his followers have clarified the nature of this derivation in any depth or detail. Accordingly, they leave us without a method for bridging the gap between a set of political principles and morality appropriate to ideal conditions and a set of political principles and a morality appropriate to the imperfect circumstances within which we live out our lives” (Phillips 1985, 551).

Robeyns (2008) first argues on this transition that ideal principles are not suitable for action-guiding behavior in society, since the idealizations these principles are based on assume away important aspects of reality. (Hall 2014) So, to make ideal principles fit for use in non-ideal theory, “[t]hey need to be adapted, reinterpreted or further developed for the nonideal world” (Robeyns 2008, 355). The most important aspect of this development is that an appropriate way of dealing with idealizations needs to be found. The only possibility for this Robeyns describes, is to simply work towards a society in which the injustices that were assumed away have disappeared from society, before transitioning the initial ideal principle into the world. Of course this is no

real solution. Robeyns acknowledges the fact that injustices are usually too persistent to be easily solved, mainly because of the underlying causes. Apart from that, and in my opinion more importantly, this strategy is logically impossible: these injustices would themselves need to be idealized to know what alternative scenario is desirable, which then needs to be transitioned into non-ideal theory and brings us back to where we started. The only other option Robeyns foresees in her article is to simply implement the ideal principles in the non-ideal world, but as we have already seen before, this will not be effective because of the idealized assumptions.

I think it is therefore safe to say that, as Robeyns herself acknowledges, she has no real solution for the transition from ideal to non-ideal theory. This road is long and thorny, and anything but straightforward (Robeyns 2008). Since that answer is not satisfying enough for me, I will now discuss two options Phillips describes in his article.

3.2 Transitioning strategies

Phillips (1985) has a little more to say on the transition from ideal to non-ideal theory. By describing a few obstacles one encounters along the way, he manages to give at least some practical guidance for the transition. According to him, understanding these obstacles is important to see the relevance of moral theorizing about ideals. One way to make more sense of the value of ideal theory in non-ideal situations is to ascribe only a *prima facie* function to the principles of ideal theory, meaning it is possible to make exceptions and alterations on them. This strategy he calls the 'amended principle approach'. Phillips presents us with a number of similar suggestions, starting from the idea that there should be a few 'test questions' to assess whether a moral principle is appropriate under the real world circumstances at hand. If a principle fails one or more of the questions, it is either possible to deny this principle completely (which would be unworkable since hardly any principle will fail the test), or to make the smallest alterations possible to the principle so that it will pass the test questions. This too is not a very realistic and practical solution: "Consider how one might amend the Utility Principle such that it becomes psychologically possible for normal persons to act upon it. We could require that in the calculation of utility different

persons be assigned different weights (e.g., that one-self, one's family, and one's friends count more than others), or we could supplement the principle with a long list of exclusions and exceptions. But what weights are we to assign, and what exclusions are we to allow?" (Phillips 1985, 562). Apart from this issue, it may simply be too hard to come up with a procedure that amends principles that are made for ideal situations to fit into more realistic situations. The only real solution Phillips sees is to skip the focus on ideal principles and rather look at the goals we want to achieve. However, doing so would mean a complete disregard for the issue we started with on how to translate ideal theory into non-ideal theory. The amended principle approach is therefore not a proper solution.

Phillips does however see another option: "I would suggest simply that moral theory begins with some fundamental value(s) (e.g., autonomy, happiness, love) or fundamental imperative(s) (e.g., "Promote autonomy!", "Promote happiness!", "Promote love!"). Ideal theory tells us how to realize that value or obey that imperative under conditions of full compliance; historical codes tell us what this value or imperative requires of us under less ideal circumstances" (Phillips 1985, 564). He then states that ideal values should be connected to the real world in the form of these historical codes. In doing so, an obligation is created to act on the ideal in the world. A problem with this principle is that there is no definitive way to identify the values that stand behind an ideal and to determine what this would mean for our obligations in real-world situations. However, some common sense can help us identify at least most values behind our Western ideals. It is then the task for non-ideal theory to make up the codes of conduct to promote these values under non-ideal circumstances. According to Phillips, there is always more than one way to do so: he mentions two, namely acting directly on a value and acting for the sake of a value to promote a wider realization of it. Phillips describes the first strategy as 'strict code' and the second as 'instrumental code', acknowledging the fact that in real life, most codes lie somewhere between the two.

The focus on either instrumental or strict code can help getting clear what the goal is for realizing a value. However, this is not enough to know how to actually get to this goal. An actual action guiding principle is missing from non-ideal theory, almost just as much as it is from ideal theory. I therefore want to dig

deeper into the necessities for creating effective policy, to find out what is necessary to make non-ideal theory a suitable guide for policymaking.

Chapter Four: Analyzing Feasibility

In the traditional academic debate there are simply the two main camps: the propagators of ideal theory and their opponents who focus on non-ideal theory. Intuitively speaking however, I think there is more to it than that, and this intuition is strengthened by Ingrid Robeyns. In her article *Ideal Theory in Theory and Practice* (2008), Robeyns argues that the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory should not be taken as black and white as is usually done, and moreover, they should not be regarded as a complete theory for bringing about change in society. Her proposal is therefore to consider ideal theory as a first step in normative political theorizing, and non-ideal theory as the second step that brings us closer to realize values in society. For a realistic perspective on how to actually bring about positive change, she believes two extra steps are necessary, for making non-ideal theory apt to use in policymaking: action design and implementation.

Robeyns states: “Ideal and nonideal theories of justice tell us what ideals we are striving for, how different principles of justice should be weighed against each other, how justice needs to be balanced against other values, and how to deal with instances of widespread noncompliance. Yet this is not sufficient for the design of action (including policies); therefore we need the help of social scientists. When designing actions (especially policies), we also need to take into account a whole range of feasibility constraints and unintended consequences” (Robeyns 2008, 349-350). A discussion on how to best design policy could be a task for social scientists, but I believe there is a role for philosophers to play as well: a conceptual exploration of the subject of feasibility, its value and the relevance of it for political theorizing can and should be discussed from more than just an empirical perspective. This will be my task for the remainder of this chapter.

4.1 Feasibility theory

To be able to make the essential step from non-ideal theory into action design, much knowledge about the workings of society, politics and human beings is needed. The common way of describing a theory or strategy in terms of realism

is to assess whether it is a *feasible* theory. In the process of making this judgment, certain *feasibility constraints* are important to consider. Despite his love for ideal theory, John Rawls presented us with a reason why feasibility is important in political philosophy, by discussing the concept of a 'realistic utopia' in *Justice as Fairness: a Restatement*. "According to Rawls, a normative political theory (or in his case, more narrowly, a conception of social justice) must satisfy two desiderata. The first is that the theory must demand social arrangements that are morally appealing or desirable. Such just arrangements may be quite different from the status quo, and may be 'utopian'. This is often a good thing, as a conception of justice should help us to assess critically our current condition. However, when our theory is utopian, we must also consider whether we can 'realistically' expect to achieve what it demands. This is the second desideratum, which concerns political feasibility" (Gilbert and Lawford-Smith 2012, 810).

Everyone who considers ideal theory to be naive and straying too far from reality will agree with Rawls' view that to realistically achieve a 'utopia', it is important to take into consideration the way the world works – it being restricted by different feasibility constraints. In a second article called *Understanding Political Feasibility* Lawford-Smith (2013) describes five different roles feasibility can play in political theory: traditionally as a tool to rule out unrealistic theories, but according to Lawford-Smith also to rank different or alternative theories from least to most feasible, to reveal the powers that different things have, to be a supplement for practical reasoning about action choice and as a heuristic with considerations on values.

4.2 Defining the concept

In *Political Feasibility: A Conceptual Exploration*, Pablo Gilbert and Holly Lawford-Smith try to paint a complete picture of the concept of feasibility, by putting together different aspects of the subject need to be present for a policy or theory to be feasible. To make clear what they consider to make up feasibility, they turn the basic assumptions of a feasible theory into a logical claim: "It is feasible for X to φ to bring about O in Z" (Gilbert and Lawford-Smith 2012, 812). This means they consider a claim about feasibility to have four variable components: X, φ , O and Z. X stands for the agent trying to bring something

about. It is possible this agent is an individual, a group of individuals or something less concrete like 'the government' or 'humanity'. The interpretation of φ and O both provide an answer to the question 'Feasibility of what?', where O stands for an outcome and φ for a way to bring this outcome about. Gilabert and Lawford-Smith stress that these last two are often hard to distinguish in actual problems on feasibility, since the consequences of an act always include the act itself. Z is the variable most clearly concerned with feasibility, presenting the context of the issue. This can be taken as broad or as narrow as needed, ranging from 'Nijmegen in December 2018', to 'all Spanish people living in the Netherlands', to 'the entire humankind in the 21st century' and even beyond that. Every context has its own inherent or incidental feasibility constraints that should be taken into account.

Figuring out if a certain outcome is accessible or feasible means finding out whether there is a path of action we can take to arrive at this outcome (Gilabert and Lawford-Smith 2012). To know if this path is available, there are two different kinds of feasibility constraints that should be considered: strong or hard and weak or soft constraints. These constraints range from the completely impossible (mainly logical constraints such as $p \neq \neg p$, metaphysical, conceptual or nomological constraints) to the 'not possible at this moment, but maybe later or under different circumstances'. Falling under this second category are physical, biological, economic, institutional, cultural, psychological and motivational constraints. Lawford-Smith describes this as follows: "Facts about the current economic system make outcomes featuring a different system unlikely to succeed, facts about entrenched political institutions make outcomes clashing with those institutions unlikely to succeed, and facts about religion and culture make outcomes featuring different beliefs and attitudes unlikely to succeed (let culture extend also to the constraints posed by the positive morality of a society)" (Lawford-Smith 2013, 255).

Robeyns (2008) stresses that most feasibility constraints lie on a continuum from the completely unalterable to the much more adaptable, and that even that distinction is not set in stone: "Surely a century ago people could not have imagined that one day there would be a safe and accessible method of birth control that did not require complete sexual abstinence. Yet this social

change arguably has important consequences for a range of moral questions. Similarly, we may not know which constraints that currently seem unalterable will become alterable in the future. For example, the constraint that men cannot become pregnant seems at present rather unalterable, but we cannot preclude the possibility that at some point in the future this would change” (Robeyns 2008, 350). This obviously applies to the soft constraints, since it is clear that the level of feasibility is dependent on the situation. More interestingly though is the fact that Robeyns argues that hard constraints do not always have to remain rigid, and that even they can become more or less feasible over time. It is thus important to make a good analysis on exactly how unalterable certain constraints are, and, if necessary, leave open some space for future changes.

4.3 Binary and scalar feasibility

The two kinds of feasibility constraints (weak and strong or soft and hard) have two (distinct) functions: the first is to completely rule out certain political plans or proposals (strong constraints) and the second is to provide them with the necessary information to distinguish between different proposals and find out which one is more feasible (weak constraints). The first of these two functions can be described as binary feasibility and the other as comparative or scalar feasibility, where there is more space for different shades of grey (Lawford-Smith 2013). According to Lawford-Smith, traditionally too much focus has been put on binary feasibility, and not enough on scalar feasibility. First a definition: according to Lawford-Smith “an outcome is binary-feasible if and only if there exists an action such that the probability of the outcome given that action is greater than zero” (Lawford-Smith 2013, 251). Another translation of this claim is that “an outcome is feasible iff there exists an agent with an action in her (its) option set within the relevant temporal period that has a positive probability of bringing it about” (Lawford-Smith 2013, 250). In this second translation, it is clearer that the outcome depends on the natural abilities of the agent (whether this is an individual, a country or something else), in a certain period of time. Depending on what context is taken into account, this often means a complete disregard for nuances in the feasibility of a theory. If, in an extreme case, a policy to stop climate change requires all Dutch citizens to stop eating meat and dairy

products over night, according to binary feasibility theory, this is feasible: theoretically speaking, this is possible. Every citizen can just start eating plant based at any given moment in time. The likelihood that this is actually going to happen is extremely small though, making it practically unfeasible. I therefore agree with Lawford-Smith that a scalar form of feasibility is much more useful in political theory, politics and policymaking for a realistic view on the effectiveness of a policy.

The biggest reason for Lawford-Smith to prefer a scalar to a binary form of feasibility is that she does not want to exclude possibilities that seem unlikely, but that are not completely unrealistic. If it is possible to consider these nuances in the feasible theory, much can be gained that would otherwise have been lost. According to her, “[s]calar feasibility allows us to say how feasible outcomes are, and then we can use that datum against the other relevant considerations in deciding what to do. Sometimes it will be worth pursuing an outcome with low scalar feasibility, because having brought it about would be really good, and sometimes it won’t be worth pursuing an outcome unless it has high scalar feasibility, because having brought it about won’t make all that much difference to the goodness of the world. It’s never worth pursuing an outcome with zero feasibility, which is how binary feasibility still has a role to play – just not a central one” (Lawford-Smith 2013, 254). The major difference between the assumptions in binary and scalar feasibility then is that the latter one is more concerned with the probability that the best outcome is going to be achieved than with a black and white assessment of the possibilities.

4.4 Value for Policymaking

Gilabert and Lawford-Smith nicely summarize the essential value of comparisons between policies by using feasibility as a tool, by distinguishing two ways in which they are useful: “First, they help identify, within a set of equally feasible outcomes, the one that is morally most appealing. Second, they furnish us with ideals that can guide us in long-term processes of political reform introducing social schemes that have only very low feasibility in the short term. We may not be able to see that we have reason to pursue these dynamic expansions of feasible sets if we do not have an evaluative picture of the kinds of social worlds

we should try to achieve if we can. These points affect the recent discussion on the relation between ‘ideal’ and ‘non-ideal theory’. The former charts morally desirable social worlds, and the latter considers how to act in circumstances in which some people are currently either unable or unwilling to comply with ideal demands. We think that non-ideal theory is important, and our exploration of the concept of feasibility and normative political judgment helps to articulate reasonable responses to non-ideal circumstances. However, given the potentially action-guiding nature of the evaluative considerations involved in ideal theorizing, we think that non-ideal theorizing should be seen as an extension and complement of, not as a substitute for, ideal theorizing” (Gilbert en Lawford-Smith 2012, 819).

To sum up: non-ideal theory needs to take into account different feasibility constraints to be useful in actual political theory or policy. There are different kinds of constraints, ranging from the absolutely impossible, to the ‘not that likely given...’; respectively hard and weak constraints. Hard constraints are useful in discussing binary feasibility: making black and white decisions on what is and what is not possible. Weaker constraints are interesting when looking at scalar feasibility, which is more concerned with comparing different ideas to see which is more feasible than the other.

4.5 Accessibility

In the articles from Gilbert and Lawford-Smith they do hardly more than mentioning the different kinds of feasibility and feasibility constraints. In a theoretical exploration this is understandable, but when applying the theory to practice a deeper assessment of the different constraints is necessary. In chapter six, where I will look at a case study on climate change, I will therefore go into some more detail about what different kinds of constraints can mean in real life situations of policy making. However, there is one feasibility constraint that I do want to highlight here, since I think it is essential to be discussed in an ethical consideration on policy in regards to its effectiveness. As we have seen before, there is quite a lot of critique on an ideal approach to policymaking. In *Political Ideals and Political Practice* (1995) Robert E. Goodin discusses a critique that focuses on the accessibility of ideals. He states from the beginning that this

critique may have a lot of intuitive appeal, but that it does not really hold when thought through. That is exactly why I want to discuss it here: a lot of the intuitions people have about ideals and their value in real life situations can be denounced when looked upon more closely.

The general critique Goodin describes here then is that ideals are usually too distant from reality to be actually able to help guide people's behavior and are thus per definition not feasible. The proposed alternative is to make ideals more accessible to the relevant agents, so that it is possible for them to fit it into their own lives. Goodin then states that this alternative is not that attractive at all: it may even be counterproductive. It is in ethics' nature to be critical and not simply align with reality. That is the reason idealism has a place in moral and political philosophy. If ideals are phrased in such a way they are closely related to peoples' every day life, this aspect is lost.

The propagators of the critique of accessibility would respond that this does not do justice to their argument. Goodin acknowledges this and tries to put in this nuance by making a distinction between idealization and abstraction; abstraction being the only legitimately accessible method for implementing strategies. As Goodin phrases it, "[t]he practice of abstracting (mentally *taking away* something from existing experience) is, arguably, far more straightforward than the practice of 'idealization'. The latter process requires one to *add* something to the familiar experiential landscape – to conceive of a world that is very much better, perhaps, but which is also very different from the one which one has always known" (Goodin 1995, 41). To make this concrete: in the case of climate change, an idealization would be to aspire a fully just society that is habitable for everyone. Climate change from the perspective of abstraction would then mean to strive for the world just as it is now, but without the effects of climate change.² For me this distinction feels very arbitrary: it is not that easy to find the exact line between abstraction and idealization, and although in theory it may very well exist, in practice it is often not as black and white. Apart from that, even if the distinction would be as clear as propagators of the critique

² There are of course other causes than climate change that make the world unjust and uninhabitable. This example merely shows two major consequences of climate change and the way the process of abstraction works in regards to these consequences.

of accessibility believe, it does not have any real implications for the implementation of policies. Goodin argues that the way abstractions and idealizations are dealt with are exactly the same, since abstractions need to be made practical just as much as idealizations when they are implemented.

This means that it may be the case that the use of idealizations or abstractions can impede the feasibility of a policy, but that this does not have to be the case. Apart from that, it may even be a good thing for a policy to be a little too abstract for the general public to identify with. This is one of the main tasks for ethics: to be critical as well as action guiding to realize the best possible results in society. Goodin therefore strongly believes that idealizations are just as inevitable as they are desirable, since making a difference in society is almost only possible with the use of ideals.

Chapter Five: Critical Reflection

In the previous chapter I discussed the importance of considering the feasibility of a policy before implementing it. However, this may not be enough to tackle all issues surrounding ideals and their transitions into policy. I therefore want to use this chapter to discuss a few additional problems, on different aspects of the subject. I will start with an assessment of unintended consequences that can arise with every kind of policy, following a brief mention of this issue by Ingrid Robeyns in her *Ideal Theory in Theory and Practice* (2008). As a response to this problem, I will then spend some time discussing another argument by Robert E. Goodin (1995), who responded on critical allegations on the desirability of using ideals for policy and how to best make trade-offs when ideals might clash. Afterwards, I will conclude the theoretical part of this thesis by looking at the stage of implementation of policy, to assess whether any more problems can or will arise at that point.

5.1 Unintended consequences

Apart from considering feasibility constraints, Robeyns (2008) believes there is something else of importance when making action design. According to her, it is important to take into consideration unintended consequences, although there is not much she has to say about them: “Unintended consequences are very important in policy and strategy design, and explain why so many well-intended policies do not contribute to the realization of the intended ideals” (Robeyns 2008, 350). One of the dangers is for instance that the realization of a certain value in one area leads to the diminishing of the same (or another) value in another area. Another possibility is that the realization only happens for one group of people, while it diminishes for another group. These tilted balances are often solved in the long term, but can still lead to problems in the short term.

A premium example of a policy with unintended consequences is the one-child policy that has been instituted in China in 1979 (Hall 2014). This measure was installed as a form of population control, at which it has succeeded. Additionally however, there were multiple unintended and unwanted consequences that are cause for concern: since Chinese culture places a larger

value on men than on women (since the men traditionally care for their elderly parents), many couples preferred a baby boy to a baby girl. Consequently, there has been a huge amount of infanticide and abortion throughout the years, especially targeted to girls. First of all, killing babies is intrinsically wrong and infanticide or abortion especially for girls is a form of discrimination. Apart from that though, the country now has to deal with an imbalance in the ratio between men and women, with a large number of single men as a result.

If careful consideration of the policy would have taken place, these unintended consequences could have been anticipated. That is not to say that it would automatically mean the policy should be dismissed, it may be the case that there are different values that would ideally be realized, but that it is simply not possible to make this happen at the same time. This is an important and possibly dangerous issue for an ideal approach to policy making. In *Political Ideals and Political Practice* (1995) Goodin acknowledges this danger and tries to come up with a solution, which I will discuss in the next paragraph.

5.2 Trade-offs

The realization of an ideal never happens in complete isolation: there are always several ideals and goals that need to be addressed at the same time. Goodin (1995) therefore describes a list of ideals as a kind of wish list: it is impossible to realize them all at the same time or completely at all. This means that translating ideals into policy always encompasses a lot of weighing, both between different ideals, and between different manifestations of the same ideal. Realizing justice can for instance mean the realization of equality between men and women, or between all different races. It could be possible for both kinds of equality to be achieved at the same time, but it is more likely that this is not possible. There needs to be a focus on one or the other, for example because of money, time or other feasibility constraints. The consequences are that policymakers often need a trade-off between different ideals or different manifestations of the same ideal.

On trade-offs Goodin first has to say that they are not always necessary, and that the first step should always be to carefully consider whether it is possible to realize multiple ideals at the same time. If the conclusion still is that a trade-off is needed, there are different forms to consider. The first form is the

most straightforward: by giving absolute priority to one ideal the trade-off between this ideal and another is no longer difficult. However, in reality this option is neither very practical, nor desirable. There are simply always situations in which a more careful consideration is needed. The second kind of trade-off, 'maximin' or 'maximax', Goodin describes as follows: "In its most general form, 'maximin' would tell us to proceed as follows: set out all our goals; determine to what extent each of them would be realized under each of the alternative courses of action that is available; and then choose that course of action in such a way that the least fully realized goal is as fully realized as possible. Alternatively, we might want to follow a 'maximax' rule, choosing whichever course of action resulted in the most fully realized goal being as fully realized as possible. Or we might want to pursue a mixed strategy, choosing a course of action to maximize the combination of most and least fully realized goals combined in some fixed ratio" (Goodin 1995, 48). This is a great step in the right direction, because there is no single value that is considered top priority at all time. However, the 'maximax' and 'minimax' versions of trade-off are not without problems too. In fact, the issues with this strategy are very similar to those on absolute priority since there actually is a focus on one (or more than one) single ideal once the priority is established.

So then the final strategy on trade-offs, and the most fruitful one at that: weightings. This strategy is as simplistic as it is complicated, because it requires a separate weighing of each case and each value. An important addition to that is that not only the ideals *an sich* are weighed against each other, but also the actual (expected) results after implementing them. There can also be assigned more or less fixed weights to different values, but they need to be adaptable when for instance the 'amount' of a certain value in society changes. Even though I agree this is the most honest and intuitive option and probably the only actually competent one, it should not be accepted too lightly, since it requires a lot of 'manpower' to work properly. Goodin foresees another problem with this form of weighing different ideals against each other: the values are always considered independently from one another, this does not always lead to the best results. This is especially true when we take notice of 'the general theory of second best', originating in economics, that shows that the obvious second best option is not

always actually the second best option. A simple example about buying a car can show why: “Your ideal car, let us suppose, would be a silver new Rolls. But suppose the dealer tells you none is available. The point of the general theory of second best is this: it simply does not necessarily follow that a car that satisfied two out of your ideal car’s three crucial characteristics is necessarily second best. You may well prefer a one-year-old black Mercedes (a car unlike your ideal car in every respect) over a new silver Ford (which resembles your car in two out of three respects)” (Goodin 1995, 53). When translated to policymaking, it is important to realize that in a situation in which your ideals cannot all be fully realized at the same time, it is probably sensible to look beyond the option of simply realizing as many as possible.

Goodin believes this critique on policymaking based on ideals to be damaging, and without an actual solution. The only option he sees is to ‘contain the damage’ in two different ways. First of all, it is necessary to identify ideals that are relatively stable throughout time and situations. In doing so, the chance of radical and unexpected changes in their effects are relatively little, even in (very) non-ideal circumstances. The second way to prevent issues is more controversial: rather than looking for stable ideals, it issues us to look for stable circumstances. The success rate of realizing an ideal is increased here, because it prevents predictably unsuccessful attempts. Goodin acknowledges this is problematic, especially when used alongside of the first method of damage control: “Telling some peoples that ‘we cannot expect you to respect human rights because you are so poor’ and others that ‘we cannot expect you to implement democratic procedures because you are so fractious’ will be scorned as patronizing by those to whom the statements are addressed; and they will, furthermore, be scorned as special pleading by those being held to higher standards. We are ordinarily accustomed to looking for ‘truths,’ not for propositions that are merely ‘true for you’” (Goodin 1995, 56). Even though this issue should not be too easily discarded, it does not mean that there is no role for ideals in policymaking. As long as careful consideration of the to be realized ideals, the right way to translate them into policy and the possible (unintended) consequences they may lead to, ideals are fruitful to start with.

5.3 The stage of implementation

After considering what society should look like, phrased in terms of ideals, making a transition to non-ideal theory so as to incorporate a sense of reality and shaping action design by looking at what is and what is not feasible, there is a final step in the process. This final stage, 'the implementation of justice-enhancing action' as Robeyns (2008) calls it, she defines by a number of different questions. "How can we communicate and implement the politics or strategies so as to earn support of the relevant agents? What aspects of the process of implementation are important in their own right? And, what kind of processes are respectful and democratic, or make optimal use of any untapped knowledge?" (Robeyns 2008, 350). Robeyns gives an assessment of this stage by acknowledging a few problems with implementation and by giving a few rules of thumb to deal with these issues.

One of the aspects Robeyns considers to be of importance for the stage of implementation is the reaction of relevant agents to a policy. In the administrative or thin approach there is no room for questions regarding agents, but according to Robeyns that is a mistake, since for a policy to have an impact it is essential people comply with it. The trick in creating an environment in which the relevant agents will comply is to make them feel as though the policies and strategies are jointly owned, so to speak. This can be some intricate business, especially if the policy includes a critique on certain habits or values of the agents. To make sure this will not cause any large issues, Robeyns argues careful consideration of the possibilities is necessary: "[W]ill an internal or external critique be most effective, what are the relevant emotional or social-psychological mechanisms at work, and so forth" (Robeyns 2008, 351). This closely relates to the issues surrounding unintended consequences I discussed before: when the implementation does not take into consideration the way the relevant agents may feel about a policy or strategy, a policy can have unintended consequences, that may lead to ineffective, or even counterproductive results in society. This is one of the core problems I wanted to address in this thesis: how do you prevent your ideals to lead to consequences you do not want? According to Robeyns, the short answer is thus to be educated about what probably will and will not be complied with by others, whether that are citizens of a country,

municipality or city in general, a specific group of people, for instance of a certain ethnicity, or even political leaders of other countries: know what they will think of your policy or strategy, and if necessary, change it to generate the best results.

Of course it is true that policies often have unintended consequences, and that they need to be carefully considered and anticipated on as much as possible. However, there is a difference between unintended and unwanted consequences that could have been foreseen, and that could not have been foreseen. One of the problems in my opinion is therefore that when unintended means unexpected, it was not really possible to anticipate to it and incorporate these consequences or answers to it into the action design. Policy makers and others responsible should therefore constantly be wary of unintended consequences and either anticipate to them, or find a proper solution would they happen unexpectedly.

5.4 Closing remarks

In sum, there are a few difficulties policymakers have to deal with – in general, but specifically when the basis is an ethical value or ideal. I do not believe, however, that these critical remarks are strong enough to disprove the value of ideals. To make a stronger case for this, I will use the next and final chapter of my thesis as a way to apply my theoretical results to a practical and contemporary issue: climate change. In the then following conclusion, I will summarize and connect my findings and conclude with an answer to my research question.

Chapter Six: Climate Change

One important issue in modern day society that very much divides people in an idealist and a realist camp is climate change. Over the last twenty years it has become increasingly clear that climate change is destroying our planet and that it is happening because of our extremely polluting lifestyles (IPCC 2014). The only way to contain the damage to some extent would be to drastically change our environmentally unfriendly habits and emit less or no harmful greenhouse gases; but that is easier said than done. The idealist side of this debate wants to aim high, believing that to be the only way to make the necessary change. The realists on the other hand think aiming *too* high will not be productive, and may even be counterproductive. Some even say that it is an entirely lost cause, so any effort at all would be worthless.

In the theoretical part of my research, I have shown both idealistic and realistic thinking to be useful and necessary in making a change in society from a policymaking perspective, especially when they are combined. I will therefore project the different aspects I have discussed on the example of climate change, to try and show the right balance between ideals and a realistic perspective – phrased in the form of a process or a road from ideal theory to viable policy. First of all, I will therefore consider the exact ideal underlying the goal of climate change mitigation, using my findings from the second chapter. Then I will try to develop this value into non-ideal theory in such a way that it is more fitted to deal with imperfections in society, like I discussed in chapter three. After that, I will take a look at a couple of feasibility constraints that shape a possible action design (chapter four), before looking at the implications for implementing this design into society and other possible concerns with the foregoing strategy.³

6.1 Ideal theory

As I have explained in chapter two, ideal theory always starts with a certain ideal. Traditionally, this ideal is justice, but other ideals are of course possible as well. When discussing climate change, justice is an important reason to want to

³ Since climate change is an extremely complicated issue, I will not be able to discuss every aspect of it here. At times I will therefore omit certain details that I do not think are very relevant in making my point.

battle it, since the consequences of climate change will hit certain groups harder than others, which can be seen as an unjust situation (Caney 2014). However, there are other important aspects of the effects of climate change, like the extinction of certain species of animals, the extinction of the entire human kind and even the complete destruction of the earth. To fit all these issues into one ideal is quite challenging, but there is one concept that I think will do: sustainability.

The use of sustainability in this regard has multiple advantages, as Franck Meijboom and Frans Brom explain in *Ethics and Sustainability: Guest or Guide?:* “Sustainability seen as an ideal does not directly lead to a discussion in terms of moral duties or principles. The role of ethics, however, is not restricted to the level of principles and duties, but also includes reflection on which states of affairs are worthwhile striving for and for what reasons they are that worthwhile. Sustainability as an ideal highlights the arguments that give sense to our striving for a sustainable agriculture” (Meijboom en Brom 2012, 118). Sustainability is usually considered from a mere technical perspective and the shift to the ethical value of this concept can broaden the discussion. An ideal in the definition of van der Burg is a value in itself, together with a function as orientation point, as I have pointed out in the second chapter. In my opinion, sustainability can fulfill both of these functions, since sustainability is intrinsically valuable (as well as instrumentally) and it can function as a future goal or orientation point: sustaining the world with everything and everyone on it seems to be one of the purest goals there are.

Now that we have our ideal, it is possible to make idealizations from it so we will end up with a utopian picture of the world. To use the question posed by Rawls (1971) himself: what would sustainability look like in a perfect world? First of all, it would mean the existence of a habitable world, where all species (animal and human alike) can live on as they have. For that to be possible, the temperature would have to be stable so the ice caps will not melt and the sea level will not rise. This also means the weather must remain stable, so no extra natural disasters will happen, there will not be a growth in the occurrence of tropical diseases and the growing and harvesting of food will remain possible because the land is still fertile (IPCC 2014). In short: a world that has no issues

whatsoever that can be caused by emitting harmful substances into the atmosphere.

The ideal theoretical conclusion would then be simple: there should no longer be any harmful pollution and the ideal of sustainability will be fulfilled. This conclusion shows both of the assumptions Valentini (2012) connected to ideal theory: the realization of this utopia 'only' needs a stop on polluting. In this statement it is assumed that all people (and companies) will comply with this new rule and that it is possible in our current society to stop polluting and still continue with our lives without much restrictions. Ideally yes, this would be the one and only solution to solve climate change and make sustainability happen, but, adapting the final critique on idealism van der Burg found⁴, this idea is naïve and unrealistic, and we need non-ideal theory to deal with that.

6.2 Non-ideal theory

In battling climate change, the important moral value that functions as a point of orientation is sustainability. Ideally, this would be realized by putting a complete stop to emitting greenhouse gases, but since full compliance and perfect circumstances do not exist in the real world, we need to consider the ideal from another perspective. However, as we have seen in chapter three, the transition from ideal to non-ideal theory is complicated. Following Phillips (1985), I think the only proper way to deal with this transition is by taking the initial ideal or value – sustainability – and turn it into an imperative. In this case, possible imperatives could be: Live sustainably! And: Treat the world sustainably! These imperatives do not yet function as actually action guiding policies, since we know not everyone will simply follow them and even if everyone would want to, it would turn out to be extremely hard to do so in practice. Non-ideal theory thus requires an assessment of the real world, which can help us decide what the proper codes of conduct are under less than perfect circumstances. The next step is then to connect the values or imperatives to the actual world, so an obligation to act on the imperatives can be created. This connection can be formed through policy.

⁴ See chapter two.

This assessment on the transition from ideal to non-ideal theory does not give us any actual and realistic codes of conduct for policymakers yet; it merely acknowledges that to be the task for non-ideal theory. Phillips (1985) mentions one more thing of importance though, that gives a better understanding of the right codes of conduct for a certain value: strict codes function in such a way as to directly promote the value and instrumental codes as a way to indirectly promote the value so a wider realization of it can be accomplished in the long run. In the case of climate change, I think we need both strict and instrumental code to realize the best possible outcome. The issues of climate change are extremely pressing. It is therefore necessary to face them head-on by creating policy that for instance forbids emission above a certain level or rewards people for emitting below a certain level. Since – as previous attempts in the form of treaties have proven – this is not enough to solve the problem, instrumental codes are necessary too. When eco-friendly living is promoted (for instance in the form of a plant based diet) it can slowly create a more environmentally conscious society. These policies are both examples of a translation of the ideal-based imperatives.

6.3 Action design

The imperatives based on the ideal of sustainability need to be connected to the real world to have value in regards to policy making. I think this connection can best be made when looking at the real world from the perspective of feasibility. I have shown the importance of an assessment of feasibility and feasibility constraints in chapter four, arguing that it is otherwise (nearly) impossible to reach your goal through policy. I have discussed the formula by Gilabert and Lawson-Smith (2012) as a tool to see which codes of conduct are and are not feasible, and the fact that binary and scalar feasibility are both useful ways to look at how feasible a policy is. Apart from that, and most importantly, I have discussed the different kinds of feasibility constraints there are, divided into hard and soft constraints. In the previous paragraph, I have briefly mentioned two possible policies to deal with climate change: directly punishing or rewarding emitting behavior and promoting an eco-friendly lifestyle. These are of course only two possibilities in a sea of opportunities, but since I cannot

discuss all of them, I will take a closer look upon these two, to see what kind of feasibility constraints they would face and consequently on how feasible policies like these are. I will first set out some important concepts and strategies before discussing the strict and instrumental policies, in which I will take the Netherlands as my target.

In the Paris Agreement, the countries involved decided the temperature of the earth may not rise more than 2°C (IPCC 2014).⁵ That does not have direct implications for policy: there are several different options on how to create a policy that focuses on maintaining this temperature level. However, the policies have to do justice to societal issues like who caused climate change and who is most capable of dealing with the consequences too (Caney 2014). This (ethical) requirement creates a lot of difficulties, resulting in different policies that all remain somewhat problematic. I will not go into this discussion much deeper here – entire books have been written on this subject. Instead, I propose to use an individual emission budget, based on the maximal amount of greenhouse gases that can be emitted before a rise of 2°C occurs, which leaves us with an individual ‘budget’ of 1.3 tons CO_{2e} per year⁶ (Chancel en Piketty 2015). This strategy has in my opinion the largest initial appeal in terms of fairness, and is relatively easy to translate into policy. At this moment, the average Western European emits roughly 9 tons CO_{2e}, which immediately shows the largest difficulty with this strategy: the changes needed to get people to drop their emission below the level of 1.3 tons are extremely drastic.

There are different action guiding policies possible to try and realize this drastic change. One of them is to simply forbid anyone to use up more of their fair share of emissions, as I have mentioned before. If this policy should be implemented, it is essential to first check it with reality, to see whether or not it is feasible the policy will be effective. To make an assessment of the feasibility of this policy, I will first put it into the formula by Gilabert and Lawson-Smith (‘it is feasible for X to φ to bring about O in Z’, see chapter four), which would look something like this: it is feasible for the Dutch citizens to lower their emissions of

⁵ This number is itself the product of a number of factors, including desirability and feasibility. I will not go into this here.

⁶ The exact number can differ based on the calculation.

greenhouse gases to 1.3 tons per year, to bring about a temperature rise of no more than 2°C in the world. There are several constraints to take into account to consider the feasibility of this statement, hard and soft constraints. Since the hard constraints, that would undeniably debunk the statement, are mainly logical and conceptual impossibilities, I do not think they are relevant here, meaning that in the binary sense, the statement is feasible. How feasible it is exactly should be checked from the perspective of soft constraints.

I will consider two pairs of soft constraints here: institutional & economic and motivational & cultural. It is impossible for me to completely grasp all the different aspects that are at stake here, so I will describe a few issues that I consider to be of importance. If the policymaker maintains the strict code, they directly tackle peoples' emissions. As I have mentioned before, it is then possible to use negative or positive reinforcement – or possibly both – in the form of fees or subsidies respectively (the exact details are not that important here for my argument, even though they can tremendously alter the reaction of the public and therefore need to be carefully discussed in actual situations). For individuals to comply with this new law, there are a few things they can do to majorly cut their emissions: start with a vegan diet, stop using airplanes and cut down other forms of polluting transport (cars, trains, buses) to the bare minimum (Wynes en Nicholas 2017). In principle, it is possible to do all these things, starting today. Only the last restriction may be problematic on paper, since many people live too far from their job to cycle there, and finding a new job that is closer to home, or move closer to the job takes some time. So far, the policy change is still feasible – theoretically.

In practice much more resistance will be met, both from institutions and from individuals. The first set of feasibility constraints, institutional and economical, is quite difficult to fully understand, and even harder to deal with. When coming up with new policy, the possible consequences to it must be anticipated. Imagine what would happen if the entire Dutch population would stop eating meat at the same time: the entire Dutch meat industry would collapse, leaving thousands of people without a job, with consequentially many additional effects (Nuwer 2016). The same holds for the transport industry if everybody would only use green transport from now on. Another option is that

these industries can prevent going under: they simply allocate their products differently, for instance throughout the rest of Europe. Apart from the consequences that will have in the relevant countries, this can mean that no change whatsoever has occurred at the level of worldwide pollution: the emissions have merely changed location.

The institutional and economic feasibility constraints show what can happen if policymakers succeed with the policy to cut down individual emissions below the yearly amount of 1.3 CO₂e. It is, however, not self-evident this will be the case. First, every single Dutch citizen must actively choose to make these drastic changes to his or her life and, as I have shown multiple times throughout this research: full compliance hardly ever occurs. Even though it is for instance very much possible to live a full and healthy life as a vegan in the Netherlands, only a small 70.000 people (less than 0.5% of the Dutch population) identifies as vegan. There is a larger group of vegetarians (that also contains the subgroup of vegans), but that too is only 3.5%-4.5% of the entire population (Schyns 2014). Even though many people know it would be better if they started a plant-based diet, they can neglect acting on it for instance because others do not comply either, because they do not believe their actions are purposeful or because they simply value their piece of meat or holiday on the other side of the world too much. Motivational feasibility constraints are therefore possibly the most elusive of all constraints, connected to human psychology, reality and other feasibility constraints. It may therefore be more useful to use instrumental code that gently steers people in the right direction, instead of pushing them in a way they do not want to be pushed, for instance by using commercials promoting eco-friendly lifestyles or educating children in school on how to live sustainably.

The process of action design is probably the most complicated of all the steps I have described: the more external factors play a role, the more you have to anticipate to (unintended) consequences, so the stage of implementation will be smooth and effective. Comparing different strategies, using the tools on scalar feasibility, can help: sometimes policy based on strict code is most effective, sometimes it is wise to take a step back and come up with instrumental policy to get to the desired goal. In this case, it probably would not be the best idea to force people to make extremely drastic changes, since the chaos that would

ensue could potentially do more harm than good. It may therefore be more useful to create a policy that combines strict code with instrumental code, so the right balance between idealism (something must change to save the world) and realism (abrupt change can work counterproductive).

6.4 Implementation

The road from the ideal of sustainability to a sustainable world ends at the level of implementation. A lot of the issues that can occur at this final stage can already be solved at the level of action design: good preparation is key, so if you design solid policies, you have less to worry about when it is time to implement them. Because of this, I will not go into this stage too deeply, but there is one thing I want to point out, based on the observations by Goodin (1995) that I discussed in chapter five. The assessments of the critique on the accessibility and desirability of ideals in policy show the importance of ideals at every level, so also at the level of implementation.

In the previous paragraphs, each step strayed a little further away from the ideal we started with, which is a good thing for making sure it has practical value in policymaking. However, in my opinion ideals have more roles to play than merely functioning as a starting point. The fact that Goodin thinks ideals (translated into policy) do not have to be entirely accessible to the general public and that different ideals play a role so there often need to be trade-offs show exactly that. First of all, it is important at every single level in the process of policymaking to be critical at what needs to be changed in society and how this can best be done: this is an essential job for ethicists. If it turns out the ideal a policymaker started with was not translated well into policy, another ideal should be taken into account too or something else needs to be changed, this should always be possible, even after implementation. Additionally, every policy needs careful consideration on the level of idealism that is put into the design: sometimes, a policy that is somewhat more focused on the ideal than on the feasibility of it may be the better choice in the long run, or it may send a certain message to the public that can create more general understanding and support for the issue at hand. It is also possible the aim of the policy was too ideal-focused and turns out not to be feasible after all (even after careful consideration

during the previous step). Problems like these can always arise, there will always be some unintended consequences: the question is how you deal with them.

When looking at climate change and the ideal of sustainability yet again, a lot of the feasibility issues should have been solved at the stage of action design. But it is always possible problems only arise after implementation. A policy like the one I described in the previous paragraph, to put a limit to individual emissions, is not that feasible, at least not on the short term, but can still seem to be the best strategy, or the most feasible at that time. Once it has been decided this policy will be implemented, continuous adapting to the actual effects of it can help improve its effectiveness. An option would be to first set the limit higher, and lower it as people get accustomed to it. It may turn out that this strategy will not work either, or that it simply is not enough to tackle climate change in this way. A second look at the ideal may help figuring out what to do, possibly along with other ideals like general wellbeing and justice. If for instance poor people suffer more from the policy, or general wellbeing declines because people do not feel free to live their lives anymore, it would be worth considering whether sustainability should still be the ideal with the top priority. As I discussed in chapter five, trade-offs are complicated, but necessary in ethics. No problem is the same, especially when the theoretical, ideal level is combined with the practical and realistic level. Considering the complexity of the problem of climate change, I think it is only fitting a thorough, ethical assessment should be made to be able to solve it.

Conclusion

I started this thesis with a personal anecdote on my vegetarianism. I pondered whether or not idealist ideas like mine are useful in actually making a change, or that they merely function as tools to make ourselves feel better. The ‘who are we kidding?’ response, that starts from a more realistic view on the way the world works, is often lurking just below the surface for any idealist – either from themselves, or from other persons. I therefore set out with a journey to find out more about ideals and their value, with as my leading question: *what is the value of ideals in a less than perfect world, especially in regards to policymaking and climate change?* Since I think individuals can all decide for themselves whether or not they want to put their personal efforts into ideals, I focused mainly on the value of ideals for policymaking: political issues like for instance climate change can be regarded from an idealist or a realist perspective, and I wanted to know what the right balance should be between the two.

To loosely summarize my findings: an ideal can be defined as a value and a point of orientation and they can play an important role when trying to make a change in society, on a personal as well as a societal level. However, there are some difficulties with a strategy based on ideals: if too little attention is paid to reality and the way the world works, an idealist is set out for disappointment. Ideal theory therefore, that only focuses on ideals in a perfect world, is not enough to make effective change in society; that is why we also need non-ideal theory. It can be quite challenging to make the transition from ideal to non-ideal theory, but with careful consideration of the underlying values we want to achieve, it is definitely possible. Non-ideal theory *an sich* is still not enough to come up with a proper policy, so we must take a closer look upon reality. I found out that it is extremely important to consider the feasibility of a policy, by looking at different kinds of feasibility constraints that prevent the perfect implementation of a strategy. Once that is done and we arrived at the stage of implementation, hopefully no more issues will arise, because the policy is neither too idealistic, nor too pragmatic. If some problems do occur, it should always still be possible to turn the focus on an ideal in the policy either up or down a notch, so the best results can be achieved. It is very important to acknowledge that the

initial ideal should not merely play a role at the beginning of the process of making a change. Throughout every stage, ideals need to be weighed against their practical value, to come to the best result.

The important and contemporary issue of climate change illustrated these findings: when you always keep your initial ideal in mind, in this case sustainability, you will always have an orientation point towards which you can focus your policy. From there, careful consideration of many different aspects of the actual world should be taken into account. It is not easy to translate the ideal of a sustainable world into policy in such a way that it is effective. This is especially true if other important values like wellbeing and justice need different strategies to be realized. The important thing is thus to keep translating back and forth, to know when to focus on a certain ideal and which policy works best in implementing this ideal into effective policy. Unfortunately, I cannot give an adequate solution to climate change, the only thing I can do is arguing ideals are important as a starting point and throughout the entire process of policymaking, but they should not be seen as superior to reality.

By now it is clear that the practice of policymaking is very complicated, especially when it is based on ideals. The intricacy of the entire issue lies mainly in the imperfections and unpredictability of society and human beings. There are too many different factors – human habits, motivations and emotions, (inter)national politics, cultural differences, and so on – to realize ideals entirely without any issues arising at the different levels. Dealing with these issues from the perspective of an ideal is extra complicated, since it may not always be possible to make a direct translation from an ideal into practical policy. I think Robeyns summarized the process from an ideal to effective policy well in her article: “In conclusion, the road from ideal principles to effective justice-enhancing action is long and potentially thorny, and much work is needed before ideal principles can effectively contribute to solving problems of injustice. For ideal theorists of justice, the main lesson to draw is that their work is only one part in a large chain before any change of justice may be reached” (Robeyns 2008, 352). Ultimately, there is no doubt about the fact that ideals are necessary and desirable. The critical, as well as the action-guiding aspect of an ethical

approach, in this case based on values and ideals, is extremely important when trying to make a change in society. A careful ethical consideration is therefore always required: in policymaking, apart from basing your policies on an ideal, you can still decide to be idealistic or more realistic. It is a cycle: you have to keep deciding which way to go.

What I consider to be the beauty of ethics can undoubtedly also be seen as its pitfall: a careful ethical consideration always requires an individualistic approach. Each case or situation is different, so not the same approach is possible for every situation. It is therefore for instance impossible for ethics to be entirely computerized (at least for now) or to be put in some sort of model. The same holds for an idealistic approach to politics. Ideals are very useful and even necessary for realizing change in society, but each and every ideal needs to be carefully considered in line with reality. It is a two-way street between ideals and reality, and both are equally essential in making a change.

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