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## **The Good and the Best: Being realistic about social change<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract:**

Too often calls for utopian social change serve as a device for conserving the status quo, because they pose objectives that are beyond what is feasible to implement and devalue reachable marginal improvement. As Voltaire famously remarked: ‘the best is the enemy of the good’. In this paper I suggest that being realistic about social change means seriously committing to realize it. I argue that social change should be conceived and evaluated in terms of a course of action rather than merely an ideal end-state. End-states must be assessed in conjunction with the means they require, other consequences they imply, and their likelihood of success (i.e. as a course of action). These additional three elements give rise to three distinct failures of being realistic about social change: the fanatic who does not consider the cost of means, the saint who does not consider the benefit of end-states, and the naïve who does not consider likelihood of success. Similar failures can be construed as empirical mistakes in giving the course of action due consideration: the ineffective actor (who fails to acquire available knowledge of means), the wishful thinker (whose knowledge of consequences is distorted by preferences) and the self-deceiver (whose knowledge of end-states is distorted by his preferences). Being realistic about social change – I conclude - does not mean that we should not be ambitious in what we propose, but that we should avoid these six fallacies if we truly care about realizing it.

Keywords: Social Change; Political Realism; Action; Fanaticism; Deontology; Wishful Thinking; Self-Deception

Carlo Burelli, Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici, Università del Piemonte Orientale

carlo.burelli@uniupo.it

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*“Were it not sinful then, striving to mend,  
To mar the subject that before was well?”*

Shakespeare, Sonnet 103

## **Introduction**

An old Italian proverb, referenced by Voltaire in *‘La Bégueule’*, states that ‘the best is the enemy of the good’ (Voltaire 1877: 50). The idea is that perfection is difficult to reach, and by striving for it we may overlook small incremental improvements which are feasible right away. Indeed, in some cases, calls for wildly utopian social changes, may compromise other feasible improvements, and ironically end up preserving the *status quo*.

This intuition, I take it, is at the core of the quite common idea that being realist is a good thing in the political world, although many may contest what such realism actually requires.

A recent literature has developed about what it means to do realist political theory: designing a normative theory, which avoids being as ‘moralistic’ (Williams 2005: 5) as much of the philosophical tradition inspired by John Rawls (Rawls 1971; Nozick 1974; Cohen 2008). Moralism is the idea that proper political philosophy is a sort of ‘applied ethics’ (Geuss 2008: 6): you start from a general theory of what people owe to each other, and then you deductively apply it to political problems. This moralism is criticised by realists on a methodological level and on a substantive level.

On a methodological level, the moralistic attitude is deemed unsatisfactory for two reasons (Horton 2010). First, it conceives politics in a way that it is very distant from our commonsensical understanding of it: roughly as the realm where we politely exchange public reasons about what justice demands. As a consequence, important features of actual political life occupy only a marginal role (e.g. parties, electoral systems, power asymmetries...). Secondly, moralism applies moral standards devised under idealized assumptions to political contexts (Sangiovanni 2016), which are collective and involve the exercise of coercive political power (Sangiovanni 2008). As such, its normative recommendations fail to offer relevant guidance in the strategic interactions of the real world (Schmidtz 2016).

Moralism is also found deficient on a substantive level because of its focus on demanding moral ideals like justice, fairness, freedom and equality. This takes for granted other essential political goods like peace (Gray 2002; Wendt 2013), and legitimacy (Rossi 2012; Sleat 2013).

However, in this paper I assume a different perspective: I inquire what it means for an actor to act in a realist way in politics. This position might very well be called common-sense realism, because it

closely resembles our intuition about the way the concept is used to criticise political agents. I am not asking how should good political *institutions* be realistically arranged<sup>2</sup>. I am rather asking how should good political *actors* realistically behave. This approach relates closely to the concerns of classic realists. The key point of Machiavelli's realism is to present itself as a better guide to political actors than idealistic '*specula principis*', which were catalogues of virtues and vices meant to educate princes. Machiavelli mostly focused on political action, and never explicitly assumed an institutional perspective. He never theorizes about the best form of government, for example, to the point that it is still debated the question of whether he favoured a republican govern, as it seems from his 'Discourses' or the prince, as it appears from the homonymous book (Baron 1961). Machiavelli was rather more interested in the individual perspective: his claim is that the political actors should not be bound by the laws of Christian morality, common at his time (Berlin 1972). In this guise, I want to inquire what it might mean today for political actors to be realist.

In this, I aim to counter a common misconception, that realism is necessarily status quo biased. On the contrary, realism is the most effective way to pursue social change. This approach has more to do with the way in which one act politically, rather than the ends one pursues. The goal itself may be ambitious, and even demand radical reforms (Rossi 2015), but one ought to pursue it in a realistic way.

### **The Importance of Realizing Preferences**

In a basic sense, a realist is someone who is strongly committed to realize his own preferences. This assumption captures the 'seriousness' towards one's own desires towards which many realists are sensitive. This concern, for example, is beautifully captured by Max Weber, in his 'Politics as a Vocation':

*'For mere passion, however sincerely felt, is not enough in itself. It cannot make a politician of anyone, unless service to a "cause" also means that a sense of responsibility toward that cause is made the decisive guiding light of action'* (Weber 2004: 77).

For a political realist, there is no value in holding the right ideal, if one fails at trying to make the world resemble it. If we truly value equality, for example, we should be acting in a way that aims to increase equality. The thought is that valuing equality means acting in a way that makes our world approximate it.

This view starkly contrasts with political philosophers of idealistic orientation, who believe, for instance, that 'the question for political philosophy is not what to do but what to think, even when

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<sup>2</sup> I try to do this elsewhere, e.g. (Burelli 2016, 2017)

what we should think makes no practical difference' (Cohen 2008: 268). Under this reading valuing equality means believing equality is the right way to *think* about social relationships, even though one does nothing to make the actual world more equal in practice. On the contrary, realists start from a very practical concern, and try to characterize how a political actor should behave, not what they should believe. This point, cannot unfortunately be persuasively argued here, but it is widely present in the realist literature. Following this tradition, this paper will instead inquire how we should realistically pursue social change, not which idealized social state is better.

In this paper, I interpret this realist assumption - the practical orientation to realize one own's preferences - as a 'meta-preference' that political actors are presumed to have. If you desire walking in the park you must also be willing to sometime take a walk in said park. This is not a particularly extraordinary claim. In isolation from other confounding variables, a preference for something must imply an inclination to do it. Of course, eventual costs could directly affect the choice of whether to actually do it, even though I maintain an inclination for it. If the park institutes an expensive entry fee, I might not be willing to walk there anymore, even if I would still enjoy it if it were free. Clearly, if the realization of one's goal counts against some other goal that outweighs the first, it is reasonable to wish it not realized.

One might argue that this meta-preference is already part of the concept of preference itself. Some philosophers do believe that 'it is tautologous that we have reasons to do what serves our ends' (Schmidtz 2014). However, the concept of meta-preference has more controversial implications: in conjunction with an external reality that limits our freedom to satisfy our preferences, it can be used to filter out those preferences we should not seek to realize. If some preference cannot be realized, then our meta-preference puts forward a 'second order' (Frankfurt 1988: 21) claim to abandon our first order preferences or to reformulate them in realizable terms. This is sometime called 'strong evaluation' (Taylor 1977), i.e. the idea that qualitative differences among desires commonly interfere with a simple and straightforward weighing of preferences.

Suppose I want everybody to earn more than the average. Given the mathematical definition of 'average', this peculiar preference is impossible to be realized. Thus, the meta-preference would, under this interpretation, give me a decisive reason to abandon it. If a social state where everybody earns more than the average cannot logically be realized, it obviously contrasts with the meta-preference and cannot be valuable in a practical realist perspective. Other examples that involve weaker kinds of impossibilities might be more controversial.

An interesting case is Aesop's famous fable: 'The Fox and the Grapes' (Aesop 1998). Does the impossibility of reaching the grapes count as a reason for the fox to abandon her preference (Elster 1985)? If there is no physical way for the fox to get the grapes, the intuition behind the previous mathematical example should carry the same force here. Of course, this case is more problematic from an epistemic point of view, as there is no way in practice to know that the grapes are beyond reach with the same mathematical certainty of the previous example. It might be the case that the fox is discounting some concealed means to do it and, if she suspects this, she might have reasons not to discard her preference so easily and keep trying to reach the grapes. Yet suppose by assumption that getting the grapes is not just difficult but truly physically impossible for the fox, it would follow that she should yield to her meta-preference and abandon her preference for the grapes.

While reality tells me which means are available, the meta-preference tells me that I ought not to pursue goals for which no means are available. This is not universally recognized, as even among political realists some believe that realism can be utopian (Geuss 2016) and that it can legitimately 'demand the impossible' (Rossi 2015). While this paper won't vindicate such a strong conclusion, it will defend the claim that realism is indeed the best way to pursue radical social change.

### **Deliberating about Courses of Actions**

If we care about realizing our preferences, we should not think of our preferences as ideal end-states disconnected from the actions available in the current context. Rather we should deliberate about courses of action:

$$\textit{Course of action} = \textit{end-state} * P + \textit{means} + \textit{consequences}$$

As the formula states, the desired end-state makes up for only part of the value of a course of action. There are three other elements to consider: its likelihood of success, the means involved, and its likely consequences. Whenever we merely ponder the desired final state of affairs, we do not act realistically and risk failure in realizing our goals.

Imagine I am considering whether to become a professor of philosophy or an astronaut. Comparing end-states (being a professor vs. being an astronaut) is only part of the story, as their practical value cannot be properly assessed, if I do not factor in also the likelihood of success, the means involved and its likely consequences. I might in isolation consider being an astronaut much more satisfying and enjoyable than being a professor. However, when I need to decide how to act, other considerations immediately become relevant.

First, I need to consider which means are available to become an astronaut. Floating in space may sound enticing but knowledge of astrophysics is required to become an astronaut. If I really hate math,

becoming an astronaut involves costly means. Such means can impose a significant burden on the value of the whole course of action, to the point that it becomes open to question if the costs are outweighed by the goal. With respect of social change, if some desired reform requires drastic violence to be implemented, we should at least consider whether it is worth doing. This consideration echoes the famous saying: ‘you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs’.

Second: likelihood of success. The most effective means available are still not guaranteed to land a success. Thus, selecting a course of action involves discounting the value of the end-state by the probability of reaching it. Becoming an astronaut might be more difficult than becoming a professor, and thus choosing a course of action must reflect what is technically called an expected utilities: the value of the goal, discounted by the probability of getting it. Moreover, it might be hard to backtrack on a course of action. If I happen to already have a PhD in philosophy, it would be much costlier for me to become an astronaut than it would be if I were fresh out of high school. This is an important consideration when pursuing social change, because choosing the less likely option often involves the risk of realizing neither. However, this does not mean that ambitious improvements are never worth striving for, just that we should balance their desirability against their likelihood.

Finally, pursuing a course of action might also lead to other foreseeable consequences, which can add or subtract to its value. For example, a likely consequence of being an astronaut might be spending a lot of time away from one's family. Another possibly more discomforting consequence is that of dying in a space accident. Even if the chance of a lethal accident is not particularly severe, living on a space station would still be more dangerous than going to *most* classrooms. Consequences need not only be negative. Suppose that I really like the fame that being an astronaut brings about: this would obviously raise the value of the course of action.

I think the reader can easily discern for himself how the frivolous example of the astronaut can be substituted with more serious and controversial questions taken from the political domain. Was Lincoln wrong in buying other politician's votes to get slavery abolished? Was the Italian government wrong in refusing to negotiate with terrorists and letting its kidnapped Prime Minister's Aldo Moro be murdered? Was Andreotti wrong in commissioning bloody false-flag terrorist attacks against his country, to alienate popular support from a party that planned to turn it into a dictatorship? Was Robespierre wrong in liberally using the guillotine to preserve the republic from monarchical restoration? Was Cesare Borgia wrong in terrorizing the people of Romagna, to prevent political decay and civil war? All these dramatic questions, I claim, have no clear-cut answers, but depend highly on the context. For a realist, the means are not always justified by ends, consequences do not

always justify means, and principles do not categorically exclude the use of means. Each element needs to be contextually balanced against each other.

This interpretation explains the realist intuition that political judgments ought to be contextual. Bernard Williams for example famously questioned philosophers who like to play ‘Kant at the court of King Arthur’ (Williams 2005: 10). Similarly, Raymond Geuss comments that ‘political philosophy must recognise that politics is in the first instance about action and the contexts of action, not about mere beliefs or propositions’ (Geuss 2008: 11). Both means and consequences are extremely variable throughout time and space. Since their assessment is essential to choose between courses of action, it is a foolish endeavour trying to discuss the merit of end-states without reference to the particular context. Moreover, in order to appropriately evaluate means in a given state, it is paramount to consider where one is at the present moment.

Deliberation among courses of action may resemble an instrumental calculus of the best means for whatever (pre-rationally) chosen end. Some political philosophers, like Thomas Hobbes and David Hume, did in fact share this instrumental view of rationality, now common among game-theorists. Indeed, classic political realists have been often seen as supporters of this instrumental version of rationality (Herzog 2008). Undeniably, deliberating about courses of action shares some similarities with Humean instrumental rationality. Both accounts are, in fact, subjectivist about value: they do not seek to establish the value of ends in any objective way, beside what the subject attributes to them. However, by taking into account means and consequences, this realistic outlook provides a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between preferences and reality. Indeed, deliberating about courses of action constraints the subjectivity of preferences, by revealing how goals themselves are not merely taken as fixed, but enter the calculation and are rebalanced against other elements in two ways.

First, actors should rationally revise their ends in light of other goals they might have. If one goal is necessarily incompatible with another goal, then I need to evaluate which one I care about the most. Suppose I like bachelor’s freedom, yet I am really in love with someone. I cannot consistently pursue both ends: I need to revise one or the other. As Robert Nozick notes:

*‘one tiny step beyond Hume, not something he need resist, I think, are the constraints on how preferences hang together [...] Contemporary decision theory takes this one step beyond Hume: although it does not say that any individual preference is irrational, it does say that a group of them together can be’* (Nozick 1994: 140)

Second, realistic deliberation is slightly heavier than instrumental rationality, because it does not simply require decisions to be consistent with a set of goal, but also with the real world which weighs

on our choices by establishing means, consequences and likelihoods independently from what we want them to be. Again, the decision about what to do partly hinges on the constraints that reality casts on our preferences.

In practice the relation between ends, means, consequences and likelihood of success can be seen as kind of ‘reflective equilibrium’ (Rawls 1971: 18). By focusing on courses of action rather than on ideal state we accept to rebalance how strongly we seek to pursue the intended goal in light of its means and consequences. We adjust the value of all parts of courses of action until they are in equilibrium.

### **Mistakes in Deliberation**

Deliberation among courses of action allows to isolate unrealistic modes of social engagement. I shall briefly highlight seven ideal-types<sup>3</sup> of political mistakes<sup>4</sup>: fanatic, saint, naïve, ineffective, wishful, self-deceptive and akratic agents:

<b>Neglect of part of the course of action</b>		
<b>Fanatic</b>	<b>Saint</b>	<b>Naïve</b>
Fails to consider the costs of means and consequences	Fails to consider the benefit of end-states	Fails to consider likelihood of success
<b>Mistakes in evaluating the course of action</b>		
<b>Wishful</b>	<b>Ineffective</b>	<b>Self-deceptive</b>
Knowledge of means and consequences, distorted by preferences	Fails to acquire available knowledge of means and consequences	Knowledge of his own preferences, distorted by other preferences
<b>Irrelevant courses of action</b>		
<b>Akratic</b>		
Fails to act on his correct deliberation		

Let us now consider each failure in more details.

#### ***Fanatic***

A fanatic is a political actor who does not deliberate on the full course of action, but focuses exclusively on the value of his favoured end-state. Consequently, the cost of means and consequences,

<sup>3</sup> These flaws only approximate empirical cases, and are by no means mutually exclusive. For example, a saint might also be naïve, while a fanatic might be also wishful.

<sup>4</sup> While these kinds of failures are ubiquitous in human life, they are particularly grave in political arena (Galeotti 2018). I will however discuss cases from ordinary life for explanatory purposes.

however grave, escapes his evaluation and makes him willing to sacrifice anything to his goal. Any means become permissible and beyond scrutiny, in light of the final goal. The irrationality of the fanatic stems from his inability to reassess the value of his end in light of the costs of its means. Yet if the fanatic truly wishes to realize what he wants, he needs to factor means and consequences in his decisions as well. A fanatic is thus someone who is so committed to some idea that he is willing to disregard his other interests (Hare 1977).

A typical example of fanatic is someone who supports a bloody revolution. Yet not any rebel is a fanatic, only those that do so without considering the means they employ. Someone who attentively ponders the course of action, but finds out that some distasteful means are indeed outweighed by the value of his end, would not count as a fanatic. The crucial element is to enter the political calculus of means, ends and consequences. Realists do not criticize the goals chosen by fanatic actors, nor the extreme means they employ. Rather, they condemn the fanatic's refusal to reconsider his goal with respect to the means that such a goal requires and the consequences it carries. Fanatics are so absorbed by their goals that they do not enter the deliberation on courses of action at all. Even if they do enter the deliberation, they usually do so only formally to seek confirmations for their goals rather than with the critical attitude to revise their end-states in light of the means and consequences.

A good historical example of fanaticism might be Robespierre, who during the French Revolution was so devoted to the ideals of the republic that he was willing to use the terror of the guillotine to secure it. Robespierre was a fanatic 'striving to establish his authority over men's minds, and to accomplish this he was ready, if necessary, to pass over the dead bodies of his opponents' (Kropotkin 1927: 551). He did not consider the costs of terror, nor its consequences, but focused exclusively on the value of its end-state: the republic. Of course, historical accounts are necessarily imperfect, and other scholars doubt that he was a fanatic. In fact, under some accounts Robespierre is viewed as a skilled judge willing to discriminate between those who were counter-revolutionaries and those who had merely been misled (Rudé 1991). This example shows that it is not always easy to assess fanaticism from the outside, but the crucial point of the argument stand: if one wants to realize his preferences, one should avoid reasoning like a fanatic.

### *Saints*

The type of political behaviour most criticised by political realists is acting saintly. The previous argument offers us a way to highlight what precisely is wrong with saints. A saint focuses exclusively on means, ignoring end-states which are only realizable employing 'forbidden' means. The problem is the same as with the fanatic: a fixation on single part of the course of action and the refusal to

balance it against other considerations. For this reason, this behaviour has been qualified ‘fanaticism of means’ (Pontara 1974).

Consider Machiavelli’s remarks about Christian ethics (Berlin 1972). According to their moral doctrine, a good Christian would refuse to use violent means regardless of the goal. He would rather ‘turn the other cheek’ to their offender. However, politics requires the occasional use of violence. Only a bad politician always avoids using violence. This does not mean that one can use violence lightly. On the contrary, an ‘economy of violence’ is encouraged in Machiavelli’s thought, because violence is costly. The point is to be prepared to do ‘evil’ when the situation requires it, i.e. when the end-state and consequences warrant it. True Christians would never consider the benefits of being evil, and would avoid doing so at all costs. Thus, Christians might make good men, but poor politicians. Weber gave a good description of this type of error:

*‘you must be a saint in all respects or at least want to be one; you must live like Jesus, the apostles, St. Francis, and their like, and then this ethic will make sense and be the expression of true dignity. But not otherwise. For if, following this unworldly ethic of love, you ought to "resist not him that is evil with violence" - the politician must abide by the opposite commandment: "You shall use force to resist evil, for otherwise you will be responsible for its running amok"’ (Weber 2004: 82)*

Note however that categorical refusal to employ violence can in some context be effective: Mantena for example argued that Gandhian non-violence was a realist strategy (Mantena 2012). In the context of a liberal democracy peaceful resistance may appeal to others and be a strong engine for political change. Conversely, using violence in a democratic regime usually delegitimizes one own position and may have the opposite effect. The context, again, is crucial.

More generally, the critique of the saint is a critique of deontological political agents. A less dramatic example is the famous Kantian case of refusing to lie under any circumstances. Even when he is faced by a murderer inquiring the whereabouts of his children, one is committed to answer truthfully (Kant 1999). A politician who always lies is usually terrible, but a politician who never lies won’t be very good either, as he would condemn himself to political impotency.

If Christians and Kantians wanted to realize their preferences, however, they should be willing to rebalance their principles in light of the end-state, which would be realizable through forbidden means, and to check if these are worthy of infringing the categorical rule. It might still be the case that they end up deciding against it, if the benefits are not deemed good enough to outweigh the costs of violating the moral rule. Otherwise, they would give up the commitment to realize their preferences, as they can give up extremely positive consequences in exchange for a minimal violation of principle. Whenever certain means are excluded in principle without entering in the political

calculus of ends, means and consequences, we fails to execute social change, and remain confined to the status quo.

As Machiavelli famously pointed out: ‘it is very suitable that when the deed accuses him, the effect excuses him’ (Machiavelli 2009: 29). Deliberation among courses of action makes sense of Machiavelli’s idea, which has become a tantamount of realism, that even repugnant means are permissible if the expected effect and consequences are far greater. However, Machiavelli adds that: ‘when the effect is good, as was that of Romolus, it will always excuse the deed; for he who is violent to spoil, not he who is violent to mend should be reproved’ (Machiavelli 2009: 29). This means that it is not the case that *any* end justifies *any* means, as sometimes his claim is too easily popularized. A more accurate interpretation would be that some ends justify some means. In particular, the effect of conserving the state and the ‘*salus populi*’ allows violent means. The best available means, even morally repugnant ones, are permissible in choosing a course of action whose end-state and consequences are good enough to outweigh them. But this is not always the case.

### *Naïve*

A naïve actor is someone who ignores the likelihood success. One option might be better than another, and yet significantly less likely to be realized. Thus, the value of the final state needs to be discounted by the probability of realizing it. Sometimes, taking a risk for a significant better end-state might be worth it, if the expected utility is greater. Other times, it is just more sensible to focus on more assured if less spectacular improvements.

Consider for example the introduction of Obama-care in the USA. Of course, one might have ideally preferred a more advanced welfare system, like those that are actually working in Europe. Yet, even the more modest Obama-care was *barely* realizable in the American political climate, having to deal with a republican majority in the senate. Striving for the more ambitious proposal, would have probably meant failure, and thus being stuck with the terrible *status quo ante*.

Deliberating about courses of action captures the worry about feasibility, sometimes (Valentini 2012) but not always (Sleat 2014) associated with a realistic perspective. End states that are completely unrealizable become inert preferences in evaluating courses of action because they are rebalanced against their zero-probability of being realized. For example, I might want to visit Alpha Centauri, but this state of affairs is unrealizable and cannot motivate me to do anything at all. The preference remains inert for as long as a new course of action emerges that might lead to my preference being satisfied. A particular goal is completely nullified if there are no means to reach it, as its probability

and expected value become 0. This does not mean that improbable goals are not worth striving for, but only that one has to rebalance their value against their likelihood of success.

A difficult case to evaluate is when by acting seemingly irrationally, we make a certain course of action possible that otherwise wouldn't be. Suppose we want to organize a large protest in a situation of widespread political apathy. This may seem impossible, but if we are slightly naive about it and we refuse to take apathy into account, we might in the end succeed in mobilizing a large number of people. Realism does not mean pessimism, instead it requires us to take the very possibility of this mobilization into account. Weber famously stated that ‘what is possible could never have been achieved unless people had tried again and again to achieve the impossible in this world’ (Weber 2004: 93). This example thus rightly cautions us against being excessively pessimistic, when we evaluate concrete paths to improve society. Sticking to an accurate assessment of feasibility is essential to pursue effective and realist social change.

### *Ineffective*

An ineffective actor is an actor that makes an epistemically wrong assessment of means, consequences and likelihood of success. If one wants to realize his preference, however, one must be very attentive in evaluating the evidence.

In a famous example of his, Bernard Williams considers the following situation: ‘the agent believes that this stuff is gin, when it is in fact petrol. He wants a gin and tonic. Has he reason, or a reason, to mix this stuff with tonic and drink it?’ (Williams 1981: 102). Williams’s idea is that due to an epistemically incorrect assessment of reality, the actor takes a course of action that does not align with his own goal, and suffers negative consequences for it.

Let us consider a more political example. A foreign political actor wishes to turn a cruel dictatorship into a democracy and concludes that a military intervention is likely to succeed, and that no significant negative consequence is to be expected. In particular, he expects this war to be swift and painless, as the dictator’s army is weak and the target population would support the liberating army. However, these factual assumptions happen to be wrong as the military intervention creates a long and bloody civil war.

Of course uncertainty is a common underlying assumption of all political decisions and one cannot be deemed irrational for not knowing something he could not reasonably have known. Yet taking a political decision without considering available information leads to failure in implementing any social change.

### ***Wishful***

Wishful actors are agents who have an erroneous view of reality, because they allow their preferences to distort their knowledge of means, consequences and likelihood of success. Just as ineffective actors are mistaken about the world in which they live, wishful actors consistently refuse to recognize it for what it is. It is thus a self-defeating mistake to allow our ideals to distort our beliefs about the world. If we do this, we misrepresent means and consequences, and thus make it more difficult to realize what we want.

Elaborating on Aesop's example of the fox and the grapes, we can imagine a wishful-thinking fox would simply refuse to acknowledge the fact that there are no ways for her to get the grapes (suppose this is true). She would never enjoy living in a world so cruel that allows tasty grapes to escape her reach. As a consequence, she is willing to falsely believe that there must be some way to reach the grapes. As she pointlessly obsesses over figuring out how to reach the grapes, she misses the food she could actually reach and ends up starving.

A political example of this kind of irrationality is given by a variation on the classic theme of 'dirty hands' (Walzer 1973), where a politician refuses to torture a terrorist in order to obtain information that would prevent an attack and save thousands of lives. In Walzer's original example, the politician is a saint: he is refusing to use dreadful and immoral means that would violate his moral principles. Let us consider a variation, in which the politician is instead wishful: he does not believe that torture is always forbidden, it would be acceptable when the lives of thousands are at stake. He is instead convinced that 'there must be a better way' to prevent the attack, which does not compromise his moral purity. If by assumption one can reasonably know that there is no other way, then he is being wishful insofar as his beliefs are distorted by his desires. The best means available in this example are very costly and thus the politician is wishfully trying to convince himself that there are better ways to obtain the same results without paying so high a cost. Being wishful means rejecting accurate beliefs in favour of beliefs that would fit better with our desires and is a detriment to realizing our own preferences.

### ***Self-Deceptive***

A self-deceptive actor is someone who is mistaken about his own desires. They allow some of their preferences, to distort the knowledge of other preferences.

I might believe I enjoy studying, while all I want is just to appear like one who enjoys studying. If this is true, then I am having false beliefs about my preferences. This is problematic because it leads one to perform the political calculus under false assumptions. This would lead to pick a course of

action, which is not in line with one's preference, or maybe even fail to carry through with it. If I think I enjoy studying, I might choose to take a PhD. However, if this is a case of self-deception, I might end up failing to put up with studying and never graduate.

This case is similar to the previous one. Like a wishful actor has false beliefs about the facts of the world, because he wants them to be different from what they are, so does the self-deceptive actor have false beliefs about his own preferences, because he wants them to be different from what they are. Of course, there is nothing necessarily wrong with having such second-order desires. The problem is when they distort our own beliefs about what we want. In this way, they alter the political calculus and lead us to courses of actions, which do not help us to realize our desires.

In Sartre's vivid description of the problem of dirty hands, it seems that Hugo is a wishful actor rather than a saint: *'Purity is a concept of fakirs and friars. But you, the intellectuals, the bourgeois anarchists, you invoke purity as your rationalization for doing nothing'* (Sartre 1965).

### ***Akratic***

The final political failure is akrasy, the condition under which one reasons correctly about what he should do, but then is unable to bring himself to do it. This case is the explicit denial of the meta-preference I have argued for in the beginning: it is a failure to be moved to realize one's own preferences. In Hume's view of instrumental irrationality, there is nothing necessarily wrong with akrasy. He explicitly says that: *'Tis as little contrary to reason to prefer even my own acknowledg'd lesser good to my greater, and have a more ardent affection for the former than for the latter'* (Hume 2007: 128).

This is a much-debated issue in philosophy, which can only briefly be considered here, but deliberating about courses of action may help disentangling this puzzling perspective. It is entirely plausible that one looks positively on some end-state, and yet refuses to undertake the course of action that leads to it. It might be the case that the costs of means and consequences for the agent outweigh the value of the end-states. In such case, the preferred end-state can only be realized through terrible courses of action. Suppose I really want to be fit, and I rank it highly among my preferences. Yet, I am also quite lazy and I do not want to hit the gym three times a week. In this case, I may appear akratic about the isolated end-state, but I am quite rational about the whole course of action.

Akrasy may however still persist with regards to the whole course of action. What if I evaluate the whole course of action positively (e.g. being fit and hit the gym), but I still fail to act? In this case it is clearly in contrast with the preference to realize one's own preferences, and should be avoided.

Ovid gave a vivid representation of *akrasia*, describing Medea: the mythical mother who killed her own children for vengeance against her husband. He writes ‘*video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor*’ (Ovid 1972: 59): I see and approve of the better, but I follow the worst. Medea may fail to entertain the deliberation on the course of action, because she did not entertain the cost of the means of her revenge, or she is rational but insincere. In this second case, she would have entertained the political calculation only to find out that her revenge was more valuable to her than the lives of her children. This is indeed how Hobbes interpreted Ovid’s sentence: ‘that saying, as pretty as it is, is not true; for though Medea sees many reasons to forebear killing her children, yet the last dictate of her judgment was, that the present revenge on her husband outweighed them all, and thereupon the wicked action *necessarily* followed’ (Hobbes and Bramhall 1999).

With respect of social change, true *akrasia* is possibly the gravest sin. One should particularly be wary of philosophical *akrasia*, where we are so much focused on thinking about the best way to arrange society, that we become uninterested in actually changing it for the better.

## Conclusion

Political philosophy should not be concerned only about what to think, but also about what to do. The reason for this is that desiring something gives us reasons to seek to realize it. Seeking to realize it forces us to confront reality, and imposes all sorts of constraints on us.

Particularly when we seek to change society, I argue, we do best if we heed these constraints. When we act, we ought to be sensitive about means, consequences and likelihoods of success.

This soberly realistic perspective should not lead us to adopt a conservatory stance. Quite the opposite. Unless we deliberate among courses of actions, we face a strong risk of failure. And in action, the cost of failure is the preservation of the status quo.

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