



Liberal political perfectionism as a morally permissible, politically possible, and probably effective non-ideal theory

O perfeccionismo político liberal como teoria não ideal moralmente permissível, politicamente possível e provavelmente eficaz

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Resumo

O artigo analisa a posição da proposta de perfeccionismo político liberal, entendido como promoção estatal das virtudes políticas liberais, em relação à sua necessidade e viabilidade práticas. Inicialmente, será apresentada a proposta de perfeccionismo político liberal dos autores, enfatizando-se sua importância prática fundamental para a manutenção e o florescimento das democracias liberais. Em seguida, à luz do debate atual entre teorias ideais, teorias não ideais e realismo político, será mostrado como tal perfeccionismo, embora parta de descrições marcadamente realistas, deve ser considerado como uma teoria não ideal, em virtude de seu compromisso prévio com a normatividade do liberalismo político igualitário, mas capaz de orientar a ação política. Por fim, será sustentado que esse compromisso com a normatividade do liberalismo político igualitário e o consequente afastamento do realismo político não diminuem sua aplicabilidade efetiva em sociedades democráticas liberais.

Palavras-chave: Perfeccionismo político liberal; Teoria ideal; Teoria não ideal; Realismo político; Viabilidade prática.

Abstract

This article analyzes the position of the liberal political perfectionist proposal, understood as the state promotion of liberal political virtues, in relation to its practical necessity and feasibility. Initially, the authors present their proposal for liberal political perfectionism, emphasizing its fundamental practical importance for the maintenance and flourishing of liberal democracies. Then, in light of the current debate between ideal theories, non-ideal theories, and political realism, this article shows how such perfectionism, although based on markedly realist descriptions, should be considered a non-ideal theory due to its prior commitment to the normativity of egalitarian political liberalism, yet remaining capable of guiding political action. Finally, it argues that this commitment to the normativity of egalitarian political liberalism and the consequent departure from political realism do not lessen its effective applicability in liberal democratic societies.

Keywords: Liberal Political Perfectionism; Ideal Theory; Non-Ideal Theory; Political Realism; Practical Feasibility.

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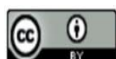
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Introduction

Contemporary political philosophy can be divided according to numerous criteria, generating several corresponding strands. The criterion that interests us here is that which establishes the so-called liberal political philosophy, a broad and varied range of theories unified by their adherence to the “liberal creed,” more specifically, to that liberalism that characterizes contemporary liberal democracies. However, this is not a homogeneous movement, as can be inferred from the notorious debates that divide its representatives, among them, “liberalism vs. communitarianism,” “egalitarian liberalism vs. libertarianism,” “political liberalism vs. comprehensive liberalism,” “liberalism vs. perfectionism,” “ideal theory vs. non-ideal theory,” and “moralized liberalism vs. political realism.” In this scenario of fierce, yet internal, disputes within liberalism, this article intends to position itself in relation to the last three debates, which will be discussed in the following terms: first – defending a liberal political perfectionism, which aims to blur the boundaries between the poles of the fourth debate; second – considering itself as a non-ideal theory, which is based on realistic descriptions of politics, but also assumes the moralized normativity stemming from egalitarian political liberalism; and third – maintaining, despite this, its practical viability and relevance from this non-idealized view of political reality and, therefore, weakening the boundaries suggested between the elements of the last debate.

Regarding the first three debates, the first falls outside our scope, and we will not discuss the issues involved in the second and third, as we have previously assumed our adherence to an egalitarian political liberalism. This was paradigmatically formulated by John Rawls (2005), from the moment he, noting what he called the “fact of reasonable pluralism,” assumed that his theory of egalitarian justice, justice as fairness (1999a), should be considered only one among the members of a “[...] family of reasonable liberal political conception [...]”, all characterized by the presence of three egalitarian elements: first, a system of rights, freedoms, and opportunities for all people; second, a special priority for such freedoms; and third, measures enabling all citizens to make effective use of these freedoms and opportunities (Rawls, 2005, xlvii). This is the set of ideas that constitutes egalitarian political liberalism, within which the liberal political perfectionism proposed here is embedded, whose necessity and practical viability we intend to analyze and defend.

To this end, the first section will reconstruct the authors' proposal for liberal political perfectionism, which will be shown as a non-ideal theory formulated from two basic and empirically verifiable political facts: the fact of the majority and the fact of decline. These facts are decisive for this formulation, and while it is committed to the aforementioned normativity of

egalitarian political liberalism, it aims to guide public political action in an aspect essential to liberal democracies: their possibility of maintenance and flourishing. This proposal has been presented on other occasions but is still under development, especially regarding its possible applications and, in this article, in relation to the debate between ideal, non-ideal theories and political realism, concerning its potential to effectively guide state political action.

In the second section, we will present and critique the taxonomy proposed by political realist Michael Goodhart (2025), which seeks to differentiate realism from non-ideal theories in order to discuss the possibility of both effectively guiding political action. In his analysis, he considers that political realism abstains from moralizing, while non-ideal theories still have a prior commitment to the same type of moralized normativity as ideal theories and, consequently, would give less importance to facts, to which they would only be sensitive, than realism, in which facts are central. Furthermore, he uses two more elements, situated character and avoidance of idealizations, to characterize political realism, which do not seem to allow a consistent distinction between the latter and non-ideal theories. Even so, based on these differences, and improperly using against non-ideal theories arguments that were produced by political realism against ideal moral theories, he will conclude that non-ideal theories are not capable of effectively guiding political action.

In the third section, in contrast to Goodhart's taxonomy, we will analyze another realist attempt to differentiate non-ideal theories and political realism, undertaken in the same work (Cozzaglio; Favara, 2024, pp. 153-162), which seems to present some advantages over that made by Goodhart. To construct their taxonomy, Cozzaglio and Favara start from the well-established self-understanding of non-ideal theories, which aim to be different from both ideal theories and political realism, and manage to differentiate non-ideal theories more clearly from the latter two than Goodhart does. Second, they distinguish between non-ideal theories and political realism based on two aspects: the theoretical role that reality plays in both and the functioning of the relationship between reality, political ideals, and progress in both types of theory, in a way that aims to defend the complementarity between these last two. From this analysis, it will become clear that both the realistic prescription proposed by Goodhart and the normative proposals of non-ideal theories are forms of theoretical orientation of political practice, which necessarily use some conception of morality and political ideals, thus rejecting Goodhart's sectarian and unpersuasive rejection of non-ideal theories, in order to preserve the possibility of taking advantage of the contributions of non-ideal theories to guide political action. In this sense, starting from the contrast between these two realistic taxonomies, we will suggest that, although liberal political perfectionism, as a non-ideal theory, is indeed committed to the moralized normativity of egalitarian political liberalism, it starts

from descriptions of unequivocally realistic political facts, the aforementioned facts of decline and majority, to which it is sensitive in a decisive way for its own possibility of formulation. Furthermore, it uses a moralized normativity, but one that is political, and political ideals that are unavoidable for liberal democracies, insofar as the maintenance and flourishing of the latter are at stake. Thus, we will argue that, notwithstanding that prior normative commitment, liberal political perfectionism proves fully capable of making the kind of realistic, practically feasible prescription that Goodhart attributes only to a political realism devoid of any moralized normativity, a deprivation that we believe prevents, among other things, any political prescription with a claim to justice in liberal democracies, whose maintenance of the conditions of possibility is the ultimate goal of that perfectionism.

In conclusion, we will suggest that liberal political perfectionism fully fits within the non-ideal theory envisioned, though never satisfactorily constructed, by Rawls, composed of both political morality and empirical facts: “Non-ideal theory [...] seeks policies and courses of action that are morally permissible, politically feasible, and likely to be effective” (Rawls, 2019, p. 118). In this sense, considering that this Rawlsian view has not been refuted by either of the two realist taxonomies analyzed, it will become clear that this perfectionism proves capable of facing the challenge of sectarian political realism in order to make its fundamental prescriptions for the continuity of liberal democracies.

Liberal political perfectionism

The question of the legitimacy of state perfectionism – or, in other words, whether it is legitimate for the liberal democratic state to have as one of the objectives of its institutions and public policies that citizens have more valuable lives – is an enduring and timely issue within egalitarian liberalism. This debate, in its contemporary formulation, was initiated by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (TJ). In TJ, Rawls proposed a liberal deontological conception of justice (justice as fairness) that opposed teleological theories, such as the then-dominant utilitarianism, and intuitionism, but also rejected perfectionism. Rawls defined perfectionism as a principle that demands excellence in the arts, science, and culture – which, as we will see, hampered his own analysis of perfectionism – and envisioned two forms for this principle: a stricter one, associated by Rawls with Nietzsche, in which the principle of perfection would be the only one from which society would mold its institutions, and a milder form, associated with Aristotle, in which perfectionism would be only one of the principles, among others, to be applied in an intuitionistic way. Justice as fairness shared with perfectionism the characteristic of being an ideal-regarding theory, as opposed to want-regarding

theories, such as utilitarian ones; however, for Rawls, the parties in the original position would not adopt perfectionism as a political principle, since they would not risk their freedom for the sake of a teleological principle of justice, in the case of the strictest form of perfectionism, and they would avoid having public questions of justice resolved by unstable and idiosyncratic criteria, in the case of intuitionistic forms of perfectionism.

In TJ, Rawls described perfectionist theories as illiberal and non-deontological, but at least since 1979, through Vinit Haksar, there have been criticisms of the anti-perfectionism expressed in TJ from a perspective internal to egalitarian liberalism. According to Haksar (1979, pp. 194-200), Rawls could not have sustained the motivation of the parties in the original position without appealing to some form of perfectionism, arguing that this would be evident in Rawls's proposal of the Aristotelian Principle. However, the egalitarian liberal critique of Rawlsian perfectionism that grew stronger in the debate came from Joseph Raz. Raz's proposal can be summarized as a liberal perfectionism based on the value of autonomy. Taking autonomy as a guiding value of a democratic society marked by a pluralism of values, Raz constructs a theory of legitimation of the authority of the liberal state based on an innovative interpretation of J. S. Mill's harm principle, according to which the state would have a duty to promote the good life (Raz, 1986, pp. 425–426), thus rejecting the neutrality of aim defended by Rawls.

However, parallel to Raz's critique, Rawls's “political turn” was underway, which would bring a new argument for rejecting perfectionism. In *Political Liberalism* (PL), from 1993, a work that presents this Rawlsian turn in a structured way, Rawls proposes new categories for people and the doctrines they profess. Both can be reasonable or unreasonable, and doctrines, depending on their scope, can be comprehensive or constitute a political conception. Comprehensive doctrines are moral doctrines that claim to account for what is valuable in human life and guide the conduct and the very lives of their adherents, and can be fully comprehensive, when they encompass the totality of values or virtues of life, articulated in a precise system, or partially comprehensive, when they articulate only some values and virtues without the claim to completely regulate life (Rawls, 2005, p. 13). According to Rawls, a reasonable comprehensive doctrine is generally professed by reasonable people, but it also needs to possess certain characteristics, such as being an exercise of theoretical and practical reason and, although stable, not being fixed and immutable (Rawls, 2005, p. 59). A fact that guides Rawls' theoretical undertaking in PL is what he called “the fact of reasonable pluralism,” that is, that in modern democratic societies a diversity of comprehensive doctrines coexist which, although reasonable, are conflicting and irreconcilable, which is not an unfortunate condition, but the result of the guarantee of rights and freedoms and free institutions

over time (Rawls, 2005, p. 36-37). Thus, the basic structure of society could not be continuously governed by a single comprehensive doctrine except through the use of oppression (what he calls the fact of oppression), requiring, therefore, a political conception of justice. This political conception, although a moral one, expressing certain fundamental ideas implicit in the public political culture of a liberal democratic society, is not one of the reasonable comprehensive doctrines (that form the background culture), but neither does it reject them. Instead, it assumes a freestanding position, focused on a specific object: the regulation of the institutions of the basic structure of society. It functions as a module capable of obtaining, through overlapping consensus, the support of various reasonable comprehensive doctrines that demonstrate the ability to persist over time and gain a considerable number of followers, whether religious, philosophical, or moral (Rawls, 2005, pp. 11-15). Because of reasonable pluralism, stability in a liberal democratic society could only be achieved if the basic structure of society were governed by a political conception; reasonable comprehensive doctrines, even liberal doctrines like those of Kant or Mill, would not serve this purpose (Rawls, 2005, p. 20). The corollary of this premise is that a perfectionist doctrine – which, for Rawls, would inevitably be comprehensive – could not be used to regulate the basic structure of society, even if it were a form of liberal perfectionism based on autonomy, as proposed by Raz.

Although we agree with Rawls that comprehensive perfectionisms could not regulate the basic structure of society without triggering oppression, Rawls's characterization of state perfectionism as inherently tied to comprehensive doctrines had limiting theoretical shortcomings. As Mulhall & Swift (2001, pp. 249–251) and Quong (2020, pp. 20–21) later highlighted, the relationship between perfectionism and comprehensive doctrines was not one-to-one, being better represented in a matrix of four possibilities in which, in two dimensions, a doctrine could be considered perfectionist or anti-perfectionist, depending on whether it maintains that the liberal state can promote or discourage certain activities, ideals, or ways of life, and, in the other dimension, it could be comprehensive or political, according to Rawlsian categories. Therefore, at least in theory, we could have a comprehensive perfectionism (Raz and Wall), a comprehensive anti-perfectionism (Dworkin and Kymlicka), a political anti-perfectionism, and a political perfectionism.

The recognition of the formal possibility of political perfectionism by Mulhall & Swift and Quong, however, was accompanied by serious doubts regarding the possibility of a coherent theory on the viability of such a doctrine. Mulhall & Swift (2001, p. 252) even stated that this would be a schizophrenic or masochistic doctrine. Quong (2020, p. 20), while also sharing their skepticism regarding this possibility of perfectionism, suggests that the moderate perfectionism of Chan (2000)

and Sher (1997) and, subsequently, that of Tahzib (2019) could be potential candidates. As previously discussed (Araujo *et al.*, 2022; Araujo; Maurício Junior, 2022), Mulhall & Swift and Quong's difficulty in identifying theories that could potentially be considered forms of political perfectionism stems from inconsistencies in the definitions these authors adopted for state perfectionism, which are always intertwined with ideas that refer to comprehensive doctrines, creating a paradox of a perfectionism that labels itself as political but is based on a comprehensive, albeit partial, doctrine. The moderate perfectionism of Chan (2000) and Mang (2013), as well as Tahzib's (2019) proposal, which Quong suggests are political perfectionisms, are, if we apply Rawlsian categories, partial comprehensive liberal perfectionisms, even though they are based on the promotion of goods and lifestyles that are far less controversial.

A political form of state perfectionism, in the sense we adopt, should have as its object exclusively the promotion of values that fall within the political sphere, such as political virtues, without the need to resort to ideals of good life or excellence related to comprehensive, even partial, doctrines. Although the notion of virtues is commonly associated with teleological theories – and not with deontological theories, such as liberalism, which both its critics and defenders generally identify as a theoretical framework distanced from the idea of virtues (Lessa, 2017, p. 85; Galston, 1988, p. 1277-1278) – several liberal theorists have drawn attention to liberal virtues that are not necessarily tied to a comprehensive doctrine of the good. Thus, for example, Galston refers to “instrumental virtues” for the preservation of society and liberal institutions, supporting the hypothesis that, with a progressive increase in the number of non-virtuous citizens, the capacity of liberal societies to function successfully would decrease to a comparable degree (Galston, 1988, pp. 1282-1288). Stephen Macedo also emphasizes the compatibility of virtues with liberalism, since the latter rests on values that are not completely neutral, as they exclude, for example, conceptions of good that violate liberal rights (Macedo, 1990, p. 257). More recently, Denis Coitinho has also argued for the compatibility of certain virtues with liberal contractualism, pointing especially to epistemic moral virtues, such as practical wisdom, humility, and integrity, in addition to the intellectual virtue of autonomy and the moral virtue of justice or equity (Coitinho, 2024, pp. 61-81).

If read carefully, Rawls's political liberalism also recognizes a significant role for certain virtues. Beyond the fact of reasonable pluralism, Rawls identifies other facts that characterize democratic public culture, among which is the fact of the majority, which, in short, recognizes that “an enduring and secure democratic regime [...] must be willingly and freely supported by at least a substantial majority of its politically active citizens” (Rawls, 2005, p. 38). The fact of the majority, like the other facts identified by Rawls, has an empirically apprehensible dimension, but, on the

other hand, it also possesses a clear normative character, because if adherence to the principles of the political conception of justice weakens considerably, the content of this conception, in order to preserve its modular character in relation to reasonable comprehensive doctrines, would have to become increasingly thin, which would lead to “an impoverished form of liberalism” (Rawls, 2005, p. lvi). The normative character of the fact of the majority, in turn, does not clash with the claim of neutrality of political liberalism, since Rawls, in PL, argues that the political conception of justice must be neutral in relation to its aim, so that the basic structure of society does not favor or harm a specific comprehensive doctrine of good, but he does not propose that the political conception be neutral with respect to its effects, since “it is surely impossible for the basic structure of a just constitutional regime not to have important effects and influences as to which comprehensive doctrines endure and gain adherents over time;” (Rawls, 2005, p. 193). Furthermore, nothing prevents the political conception of justice to “[...] affirm the superiority of certain forms of moral character and encourage certain moral virtues,” which would be precisely the political virtues, or virtues of “fair social cooperation, such as the virtues of civility and tolerance, of reasonableness and the sense of fairness” (Rawls, 2005, p. 194). As such, political virtues are equivalent to a capital of democratic society, constituting a great public good, but, like all capital, they are also subject to depreciation if they are not maintained and constantly renewed (Rawls, 2005, p. 157).

Therefore, the proposal of liberal political perfectionism that we uphold considers it legitimate for the liberal democratic state to promote political virtues, without thereby incurring the problems associated with liberal perfectionism invoked by the defenders of Rawlsian-based political liberalism. In this context, it is necessary to understand that the virtues that are the object of liberal political perfectionism do not correspond exactly to the Aristotelian virtues, although there are points of intersection, and they have at least three dimensions: they affect the basic structure of society itself, centering on the fundamental political relationship between it and the citizenry, whereby simply not being reasonably rejected by the majority of citizens is insufficient; they pertain to the political sphere, aiming at the good of a well-ordered society, as opposed to the objects of comprehensive doctrines of the good; furthermore, political virtues—which are nonetheless moral virtues—guide a liberal political perfectionism regarding what the State may promote or discourage; that is, they guide a state perfectionism, addressing questions about its necessity, feasibility, and effectiveness in guiding political action. The content of political virtues is not static or fixed. In PL, Rawls already indicates certain political virtues essential for fair cooperation, such as tolerance, civility, reasonableness, and a sense of fairness (Rawls, 2005, p. 194), but this list is not exhaustive and will depend on the context and the point at which a democratic society finds itself in a non-

ideal situation. We can indicate that, depending on the proposed conception of justice, a political virtue of anti-racism would be necessary (see Araujo and Mauricio Junior, 2025), as well as the political virtue of care (see Dagger, 2014, p. 308; Schwarzenbach, 1996, p. 120). Political virtues, in our proposal, demand a more in-depth analysis. For example, religious tolerance is not simply about accepting that everyone has the right to profess a religion, but about recognizing that this is a fundamental value of a liberal democratic society, to the point of requiring the State to legitimately guarantee the religious freedom of others. Similarly, a politically virtuous citizen, in addition to not being racist, supports a position that prevents the basic structure of society from being contaminated by injustices and discrimination based on racial criteria. Regarding the political virtue of care, this guides people to be committed to the dignified condition of other members of society, so that they do not suffer a reduction in their capacity to cooperate equitably nor are they stigmatized by a situation of misfortune (see Mauricio Junior, 2025). It cannot be forgotten, however, that these virtues are political and should be promoted with fair cooperation as a reference point, not a specific comprehensive doctrine.

The most important contribution of this proposal, however, is not filling a theoretical gap in the framework of possible state perfectionisms within the scope of egalitarian liberalism, but rather pointing to the necessary formulation of a non-ideal theory to deal with the erosion of the majority fact in contemporary democratic societies. As we have stated, the fact of the majority has a dimension that can be empirically assessed, as well as a normative dimension, since a liberal democratic society cannot be sustained based on a political conception that is not supported by most of its politically active citizens. It can be assumed that Rawls did not feel the need to develop this point of his theory because he considered a scenario of moral progress arising from the expansion of civil rights in the USA and the process of redemocratization in Latin America, Africa, and Eastern Europe, which marked the last decades of the last century. Rawls' optimism, however, was not justified, since there were no guarantees that civil society would be able, on its own, to reproduce the foundations of a “lasting and secure democratic regime” (Rawls, 2005, p. 38). In this sense, Kymlicka (1989, p. 899) had already observed that there is a liberal belief “[...] in the operation of nonstate forums and processes for individual judgment and cultural development [...]”, taking the existence of a diverse and tolerant culture “[...] as something which naturally arises and sustains itself, the ongoing existence of which is therefore simply assumed in a theory of justice”.

However, it remains evident in the current scenario that democratic erosion has been the rule, not the exception. According to the V-Dem Institute report (2025), the last 25 years have witnessed a

regression in the level of democracy enjoyed by the average citizen to levels similar to 1985, with “a true global wave of autocratization”, where “liberal democracies have become the least common type of regime in the world,” and progressive attacks on freedom of expression have also been observed:

The outlook for the world at the end of 2024 is worse than in the last 25 years. As we have detailed and discussed [...], the trend of the “third wave of autocratization” is deepening and spreading. This includes the weakening of democracy in some established liberal democracies, the collapse of democracy in countries that have been democratic for most of the 21st century, as well as the worsening of autocracy in already autocratic states.

This empirical finding dismantles the optimism about the spontaneous self-reproduction of liberal democracies and exposes a fact not pointed out by Rawls – the fact of decline – whereby, “without a conscious and consistent project of stabilization and development, liberal democracies decline,” failing to meet the normative requirement of the fact of the majority (Araujo; Maurício Junior, 2022, p. 540). In this context, the proposal of liberal political perfectionism that we present can be understood, as we will see, as a non-ideal theory to deal with an “extension problem” not developed by Rawls in PL. However, dealing with this problem will require answering the question of whether non-ideal theories, including liberal political perfectionism, can guide political action in a morally permissible, politically feasible, and likely effective way in the face of decline, especially in the face of the challenge from political realists who deny this guiding capacity not only to ideal theories, a view shared by many non-ideal theorists, but even to non-ideal theories themselves, due to the moralized normative commitment of the latter to certain political ideals.

Non-ideal theories and political realism: description and normativity in light of Michael Goodhart's sectarian realist taxonomy

As already mentioned in the introduction, liberal political perfectionism is committed to egalitarian political liberalism and openly adopts its normativity, based on principles of justice, paradigmatically established by John Rawls's justice as fairness, which demand equal liberties and fair equality of opportunity for all citizens. The question of the practical implications of that liberal conception of justice arose from the time of its formulation in *A Theory of Justice*, and Rawls's position on the matter, which remained throughout his work, even after his “political turn,” consolidated in *Political Liberalism*, was always clear: “The aim of justice as fairness is, therefore, practical [...]” (Rawls, 2011, p. 11). Despite this, he divided his theory of justice into two parts, ideal and non-ideal, which have different relationships with practical political issues. On the one hand,

which was his assumed focus, is the part he called strict compliance or ideal; on the other hand, there is the partial compliance or non-ideal compliance, which would deal directly with the problems of injustice, that is, with the critical and urgent issues of everyday life (Rawls, 1999a, p. 8).

To a large extent, Rawls' reception took the ideal part of justice as fairness as equivalent to the whole theory, which then became the symbol of idealized theories, incapable of taking into account the real world, which was overlooked by these theories' concern with something different: “[...] the highly idealized and strongly moralized worlds that have for a long time informed what I call ideal moral theory or IMT [...]” (Goodhart, 2024, p. 67). Thus, both the “ideal x non-ideal” division itself and the almost exclusive focus on the ideal part seemed to indicate that Rawls' interest was not focused on practical issues and injustice, both being used as a starting point for the criticisms of excessive idealization made against him. However, contrary to this type of critical interpretation, he also made it clear that he considered the ideal part fundamental to the non-ideal part, insofar as the nature and aims of a perfectly just society, a well-ordered society, sought by the first part, would be the only basis for understanding those more urgent issues of injustice, which the second would deal with directly (Rawls, 1999a, p. 8). Finally, he indicated even more direct practical implications than those linked to understanding the issues to be addressed by the non-ideal part, highlighting the role of the ideal part in establishing objectives to guide the course of social reforms to be implemented by non-ideal theories (Rawls, 1999b, p. 89) and in defining the priority in addressing injustices, even though he left unanswered how this would occur (Rawls, 1999a, p. 216). Thus, with these delimitations and definitions, Rawls laid much of the framework for the future debate between ideal and non-ideal theories: establishing an inaugural taxonomy; suggesting a division of labor between those parts or forms of theory; defining a hierarchy between both; and, finally, very influentially defending the focus on ideal theory.

However, in the last two decades, all of this has become the subject of strong and detailed criticism, as can be seen in a recent collection of texts specifically focused on non-ideal theories (Hilkje; Müller, 2024), which can be considered the main reference work in this debate. In it, according to its organizers, almost all authors consider ideal theories such as Rawls' irrelevant or even detrimental to their purposes, especially that of addressing specific injustices, attributing this capacity only to non-ideal theories: “Non-ideal theory has become a synonym for theories that focus on the problems of the unjust world and represent an attempt to provide guidance and develop strategies that aim at ameliorating unjust conditions” (Hilkje; Müller, 2024, p. 1). However, this very conviction that non-ideal theories would be able to offer practical guidance is questioned

by one of the authors of the aforementioned collection, responsible for a kind of “friendly fire” against such theories, carried out in the name of political realism, as stated by the organizers themselves: “For Michael Goodhart [...], non-ideal theory [...] should not be used as a general term for approaches that take the real world seriously because – in the light of realist political theories – it does not take the real world seriously enough in various respects” (Hilkje; Müller, 2024, p. 3). Based on this critique, Goodhart (2024) complicates the original Rawlsian taxonomy, including political realism in the debate as an opposing pole to both ideal and non-ideal theories, both grouped together under the accusation of “not taking the real world seriously enough” and, consequently, not being able to offer guidance to combat injustices or, in the words of the chapter title, to produce “realistic prescriptions,” something that would only be within the reach of political realism.

However, before beginning the analysis of Goodhart’s critique of non-ideal theories, we will briefly reconstruct one of the elements from which she starts, namely, the distinctions regarding the relationships between certain forms of theory, on the one hand, and facts or empirical data, on the other, made by Enzo Rossi in an article aimed at examining three types of political theory: normative behaviourism, grounded normative theory and radical realism. For Rossi (2023, p. 484), these three forms of theory can be considered fact-centric, as opposed to non-ideal theories, which would only be fact-sensitive. The difference is that fact-centric theories are empirically grounded, while fact-sensitive theories would be empirically informed. Thus, the former draw normative conclusions from empirical descriptions of states of affairs, so that their claims could not even exist without the contribution of empirical data. On the other hand, even though they are fact-sensitive, non-ideal theories would only modulate their abstract moral commitments—to justice, democracy, equality, etc.—and their application. However, such commitments would be prior to the empirical data and, in this sense, independent of them, with only the aforementioned modulation occurring through feasibility constraints, considerations regarding motivation, claims about the priority of confronting various moral evils, etc. Rossi (2023, p. 484) concludes that, in contrast to fact-centric theories, non-ideal theories ultimately follow ideal theories, evaluating states of affairs and courses of action based on these prior moral commitments, with the only difference being that non-ideal theories take into account certain empirical constraints, which is precisely what he called their fact-sensitivity (fact-sensitive). However, despite his assumed adherence to radical realism and this unification of ideal and non-ideal theories under the claim that they share the same prior moral commitment, Rossi does not go so far as to affirm that such theories would be incapable of guiding political action, much less does he argue in this regard—something that Goodhart’s critique, as we will see next, intends to do

Initially, Goodhart (2024, p. 67) seems to follow the typical critical itinerary adopted by non-ideal theories against ideal ones, accusing the type of theory he called “ideal moral theory” of having strayed too far from the real world. However, subsequently, explicitly setting aside non-ideal theories, supposedly leveled with ideal moral theories due to the aforementioned prior moral commitments of the former, he posits as the main criticisms of ideal moral theory those he calls realistic political theories, defined by four traits: first – they are fact-centered; second – they are situated; third – they avoid idealizations; and fourth – they abstain from moralizing. However, according to him, that distancing from the real world that occurs in ideal moral theories has led such realistic political theories, in their most radical form, to consider that taking the real world seriously, without concessions to the aforementioned moral commitments, would eliminate even the possibility of any prescriptive theories, which articulate and defend normative views. Given this, he considers that this stance, which aims to isolate realist political theory from normativity, represents an excessive reaction that confuses normativity with moral absolutism. Thus, his proposal is to show that it is possible to have a realist position and still make normative, but not moralized, prescriptions, a combination that would be forbidden to ideal and non-ideal theories (Goodhart, 2024, pp. 73-74). Based on this, this section seeks to examine whether the differences he suggests exist between realist and non-ideal political theories are sufficient to consider that the latter do not take reality seriously enough: “In fact, on the definition of realistic political theorizing that I shall put forward here, nonideal theory doesn’t qualify as realistic because, in various ways, it does not take the real world seriously enough” (Goodhart, 2024, p. 68). To this end, we will attempt to analyze the four aforementioned characteristics of realist political theories proposed by him and compare them with a view of non-ideal theories.

The first characteristic of realist theories proposed by him is that they are fact-centered: “Any realistic theory will, I think, center facts. [...] To me, a fact-centric theory is one informed by actually existing problems of description, explanation, interpretation, or evaluation of the world as it is or has been” (Goodhart, 2024, p. 68). As seen above, for him, who adopts this classification from Rossi (2023), this characteristic would already be sufficient to separate non-ideal theories from realist political theories, insofar as the former would only be sensitive to facts (fact-sensitive), while the latter are fact-centered. However, any adherent of non-ideal theories would object, saying that these are also informed by actually existing problems of describing the world as it is, full of specific injustices that are only revealed as such precisely in the light of a certain normativity and whose confrontation constitutes their objective. Indeed, as we suggested in another, still unpublished, article, non-ideal theories are composed of a dual structure, with a scientifically informed descriptive part and a normative part, derived from the general normativity of a corresponding

ideal theory, which partially determines its descriptive part, allowing the identification of injustices as that which contradicts said normativity. Thus, even admitting that non-ideal theories have prior abstract moral commitments to the normativity of an ideal theory, as argued by Rossi (2023, p. 484) and repeated by Goodhart (2024), it seems undeniable that non-ideal theories are at least partially constituted by descriptions of the world, that is, by facts.

Regarding the second characteristic of realist theories, that of being situated, this means that such theories do not invoke any kind of neutrality, impartiality, or objectivity, but assume their values and political commitments: “[...] theory is situated, shaped by the values and political commitments that animate it” (Goodhart, 2024, p. 69). However, this type of belonging or provenance is not exclusive to political realism, but is something widely disseminated in the political philosophy of recent decades and, even more so, in non-ideal theories, which recognize their limited and thus situated character: “What all representatives of non-ideal theory seem to agree on is the rather vague formula that what makes non-ideal theory distinctive (from ideal theory) is that it concerns the real world, its actual institutions, and its agents and knowers with all their limitations” (Hilkje; Müller, 2024, p. 2). Regarding the third characteristic, avoiding idealizations, the attempt to differentiate between political realism and non-ideal theories based on it also fails, insofar as non-ideal theories are defined precisely by the rejection of idealizations in ideal theories. In fact, this rejection has been part of the definition of non-ideal theories since Rawls' initial division, and there is no possibility of modifying this without incurring an evident *contradictio in terminis*. In the case of liberal political perfectionism, this can be verified in the very facts from which it starts, the fact of the majority and the fact of decline, which no longer refer to the well-ordered society, one of the idealizations, along with strict conformity, of justice as fairness, but rather to concrete liberal democracies, in which the aforementioned facts are observed.

On the other hand, when it comes to the fourth characteristic of realist theories, the abstention from moralizing, the distinction from non-ideal theories comes into play, which is more complex and will therefore require further analysis. In fact, the issue that seems to be decisive for Goodhart is the reaction to ideal moral theories, which he calls the “realist turn”:

The realistic turn in political theory can be understood as a reaction against ‘the colonization of political theory by ethics over the past 40 years’ (Freeden, 2012, p. 1). It is an ‘anti-Kantian gesture’ (Scheuerman, 2013), a repudiation of what Geuss (2008, p. 89) memorably labeled the ‘ethics first’ approach to political theory (Goodhart, 2024, p. 70).

It is important to emphasize that the references in this quote belong to the debate aimed at confronting “the colonization of theory by ethics in the last 40 years,” that is, since the publication

of *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls, 1999a) in 1971. This means that the realist turn in political theory sought to reject only ideal moral theories, but not non-ideal theories, whose own “turn” in relation to ideal moral theories only consolidated as a debate in the last twenty years. In fact, these two debates or “turns” are aimed at criticizing, for their supposed excessive idealization and moralization that distance themselves from the real world, the same theoretical movement, the one that has Rawlsian justice as fairness as its initial impulse and main reference. Given this, it seems that Goodhart inappropriately mobilizes, against non-ideal theories, the realist arguments aimed at confronting ideal moral theories. This inadequacy has already been shown in the analysis of the first characteristic of the realist theories listed by him, the centrality of facts, insofar as it only manages to superficially differentiate the two forms of theory, due to the decisive role that facts describing injustices play in both. This inadequacy becomes especially evident when we compare the second and third characteristics of realist theories, that of being situated and avoiding idealizations, since these do not allow, as we have seen, any significant differentiation between these theories and non-ideal ones. However, if the first three characteristics attributed by Goodhart to political realism do not seem sufficient to establish a distance between it and non-ideal theories, when it comes to the fourth characteristic, the abstention from moralizing on the part of realist theories, this becomes more persuasive. In fact, if we agree that non-ideal theories have abstract moral commitments prior to the facts, but that they are modulated by them, in the sense of taking into account constraints of viability, considerations about motivation, etc., there seems to be an adequate differentiation between political realism and non-ideal theories. For us, as stated above, these moral commitments are undeniable, since we consider that non-ideal theories possess, alongside the descriptive part, a normative aspect, derived, implicitly or not, from the corresponding ideal theories. Furthermore, if non-ideal theories are to combat injustices, they need to have some kind of normativity capable of pointing out something as being morally unjust (Freeman, 2023, p. 4).

Having reached this point, we consider it possible to make a defensible distinction between political realism and non-ideal theories, partially using the first and adequately the fourth characteristic of realist theories proposed by Goodhart, while discarding the second and third as inadequate for such a task. However, the question that still needs to be answered is whether the modulated moral commitment assumed by non-ideal theories prevents them from taking reality seriously, with the consequent impossibility of providing realistic normative prescriptions, as argued by him. To answer this question, in the next section we will use a different attempt to differentiate realism from non-ideal theories made by two realists (Cozzaglio; Favara, 2024, pp. 153-162), which will be analyzed in contrast to Goodhart's. We consider the taxonomy presented by these authors to be

more successful in this endeavor and more fruitful for our purposes, since the differentiation they make proves compatible with the aim of guiding practical political action, which is typical of non-ideal theories and the main reason for their existence, particularly the liberal political perfectionism that we defend here, precisely in contrast to the detachment from reality that they criticized in ideal moral theories, the only target that could be reached by criticisms such as those of Goodhart.

Non-ideal theories and political realism: description and normativity of liberal political perfectionism as a realistic prescription

The taxonomy presented by the two realist authors (Cozzaglio; Favara, 2024, pp. 153-162), in the same work as Goodhart's, is clearer than the one he suggested, allowing for a more persuasive distinction between the two forms of theory, political realism and non-ideal theories. It is also more fruitful for political philosophy in general, insofar as it moves away from realist sectarianism and seeks to reconcile the aforementioned forms of theory, opening space for possible contributions from non-ideal theories and, consequently, from liberal political perfectionism. Thus, like Goodhart, Cozzaglio and Favara affirm that non-ideal theories are previously committed to abstract moral principles. However, in their view, this commitment does not mean a detachment from the real world that would lead to the impossibility of practical political guidance on the part of such theories. Indeed, in the case of liberal political perfectionism, taken as a non-ideal theory committed to the normativity of egalitarian political liberalism, the decisive weight given to the descriptive aspect of such perfectionism, without which it would not even be formulated, and the Rawlsian guidelines for non-ideal theories adopted by it – moral permissibility, political possibility, and probability of effectiveness (Rawls, 2019, p. 118) – allow us to affirm that it “takes reality seriously enough,” contrary to what Goodhart maintains, and that it is capable of guiding state political action. In this section, we intend to show that these two statements are compatible with Cozzaglio and Favara's proposal and that the “realistic prescriptions”, invoked by Goodhart as exclusive to political realism, are only one of the ways to realistically guide political action, different from that achievable by non-ideal theories. However, before attempting to argue in favor of the possibility of liberal political perfectionism being able to make realistic prescriptions, of a type fundamental to liberal democracies, we will use as a starting point the reasons why we consider that the authors do a more consistent job than Goodhart and compatible with that Rawlsian idea of non-ideal theory, whose three guidelines, moral permissibility, political possibility and probability of effectiveness, title our article and which we consider a more fruitful conception for political philosophy.

An initial advantage of the analysis of those authors is that, unlike Goodhart, they start from the well-established and generally accepted self-understanding of non-ideal theorists, who conceive their theories as “[...] a form of political theorizing aimed at providing us with normative tools to orient our actions in real political circumstances, thereby offering a remedy to the (often too) abstract nature of normative political theory” (Cozzaglio; Favara, 2024, p. 153). In this definition, there seems to be a certain paradox, since non-ideal theories, although initially conceived and having their functions stipulated by Rawls, only consolidate as a theoretical movement precisely in reaction to Rawlsian ideal theory and those that follow it, whose excessively abstract character they intend to remedy. However, this is only an apparent paradox, since this “remedy” was never intended to criticize Rawls' definition of non-ideal theory, but only to react to the excessively abstract nature of normative political theory in general, deeply influenced by the ideal part of his theory, justice as fairness. It is in this sense that, starting from that self-understanding of non-ideal theories, the authors analyze some differences between realist and non-ideal theories, but, unlike Goodhart, they admit the alleged capacity of the latter to guide action in real political circumstances. However, they consider that, despite sharing this capacity with realist theories, non-ideal theories should not be confused with the former, since both perform complementary functions. Here, we will not attempt to directly address this supposed complementarity, but rather analyze the two differences they point out, relating, respectively, to the theoretical role of reality and the relationship between reality, political ideals, and progress, in the two forms of theory (Cozzaglio; Favara, 2024, p. 154).

First, non-ideal theories are geared towards reality insofar as reality limits and defines the applicability of their normative standards, so there is an appeal to real facts that seeks to ensure and verify the effectiveness of this normativity. According to the authors, such effectiveness has two meanings: first, a non-ideal theory will be effective to the extent that it proves capable of guiding action in certain concrete circumstances and in light of its normative principles, giving a central role to the notion of viability; second, this type of theory will be effective if it is capable of establishing regulatory standards for the political reality to which it applies. Thus, both senses of effectiveness indicate that reality plays an essential role in the application of ideal theories, but not in their normative justification, which is established beforehand (Cozzaglio; Favara, 2024, p. 155, p. 157), in the same way as suggested by Rossi (2023) and adopted by Goodhart (2024). In turn, realist theories are not based on effectiveness, but on their adequacy in relation to the hard facts of politics, such as the pervasiveness and persistence of conflict and disagreement, and to the specific political context to which they are addressed. Thus, realists take political reality as the starting point that establishes both the content of the theory and the issues that it should address, which vary

according to the context. This means that, unlike what happens in non-ideal theories, reality acts in the very justification of realist political theories, which do not have normative commitments prior to their dealing with reality. Even so, the authors' conclusion is not that there is a complete rejection of morality on the part of political realism, but only of a morality that requires pre-political validity and is of a comprehensive type, since they recognize another form of morality, embedded in different cultures and political practices, which must be taken into account by realists (Cozzaglio; Favara, 2024, p. 155).

Here, however, there is an omission on the part of the Cozzaglio and Favara, who do not specify whether they consider the prior, pre-political normative commitments of non-ideal theories to be with moralities of this comprehensive type. In the case of the prior normative commitments of liberal political perfectionism, admittedly made with egalitarian political liberalism, this is by no means a comprehensive morality, intending to account for everything that is valuable in human life and to guide the conduct of its adherents, even going so far as to intend to completely regulate life (Rawls, 2005, p. 13), but a political morality, aimed exclusively at regulating the basic structure of liberal democratic societies. Therefore, it is clear that attention to reality, always contextual, is characteristic of both non-ideal theories and political realism, and that morality, albeit under different aspects, respectively, pre-political or originating from politics, is also part of both forms of theory.

Secondly, the authors compare the respective ways in which non-ideal and realist theories address the relationship between political ideals, reality, and progress, in what they call the problem of “political judgment”. According to them, non-ideal theories, seeking to understand what should be done in non-ideal circumstances, have two views of the role to be played by political ideals: 1 – the role of target, in which ideals represent the very objective to be achieved by political action in the end; 2 – the role of reference, in which political ideals function as theoretical devices to identify the normative principles that should regulate politics in non-ideal conditions. In any case, both views aim to guide how political ideals should inform political action in real circumstances, and progress would be an approximation of an ideal state of affairs, whose desirability is independent of the political context to which those ideals apply (Cozzaglio; Favara, 2024, pp. 159-160). In turn, realist theories consider that subordinating political action to ideals can be naive or dangerous, arguing that contextual political problems must also have contextual political solutions, so that the best political option will not always be a search for or approximation of political ideals. Thus, realist theorists will not attempt to guide political action based on pre-established ideals; therefore, the standards for determining whether a given change would be progress or not cannot be pre-political,

but must derive from politics itself, according to two guidelines: first, it must be a justifiable political relationship, as opposed to one of domination; second, the evaluation standards must emerge from the political context in question (Cozzaglio; Favara, 2024, pp. 160-161).

Apparently, the difference between the two forms of theory would be even clearer than shown in the previous comparison. However, the first realist guideline mentioned above, the requirement that political relations be justifiable in order to judge a change as progress, clearly refers to an ideal, albeit a formal one, of justification or basic requirement of legitimation, which the authors adopt in the version presented by Bernard Williams: “[...] following Williams, we are in a political relationship if the political authority provides subjects with a justification of the political order that makes sense to those subjects, and if their acceptance of power is not manipulated by the authority itself [...]” (Cozzaglio; Favara, 2024, p. 158-159, 161). Therefore, according to this second form of comparison, some kind of relationship with political ideals is characteristic of both non-ideal theories and political realism, albeit under different aspects, respectively, pre-political or originating from politics.

Having analyzed the taxonomy proposed by these realist authors, establishing the perception that both non-ideal theories and political realism take into account, along with the facts, some form of morality and political ideals, albeit diverse, it will now be necessary to return to Goodhart's idea of realist prescription and analyze how that taxonomy of the authors would allow us to refute the realist, but sectarian, accusations of the latter. In this way, it will be possible, from the realist friendly fire, this time against him, proposed by them, to support the capacity to guide political action that we consider a possibility of non-ideal theories in general and of liberal political perfectionism in particular.

As we have already said, when it comes to analyzing the possibility of making prescriptions, Goodhart begins by mobilizing realist criticism against the distancing from reality of those he called ideal moral theories. According to him, such criticism led radical realist political theories to consider that taking the real world seriously would eliminate even the possibility of any prescriptive theories, which would articulate and defend normative views detached from reality. However, he warns that radical political realism, in attempting to completely isolate itself from normativity, suffers from an excess, although justifiable given the legitimate concern of realist theorists with prescriptions, which they consider to be distorting and moralistic: “Prescription distorts when theorists present their normative recommendations as objective, impartial, rational, and so on. Prescription moralizes when theorists invoke extra-political warrants to establish the authority of their normative claims and arguments” (Goodhart, 2024, p. 71). Given this, he intends to deal with the

excessive radical realist reaction to these problems, arguing that it confuses ideology with distortion and normativity with morality, confusions that he intends to dispel in order to show that it is possible to have a realist position and still make normative, but not moralized, prescriptions, a combination that would be forbidden to both ideal and non-ideal theories (Goodhart, 2024, pp. 73-74).

Regarding the first misconception, Goodhart (2024, pp. 69, 72) invokes both the second characteristic he attributed to political realism, its situated character, and his definition of ideology as “the structure of values, beliefs, and ideas that people use to understand the world, organize and justify their thoughts and actions in it”. Based on these, he suggests that the radical realist position, whose main exponents would be Enzo Rossi and Janosch Prinz (Prinz; Rossi, 2017; Rossi, 2023), confuses ideology with distortion, presupposing a separationist understanding between political theory and politics and ignoring the situated character of the realist theorist himself, who also possesses an ideology in the aforementioned sense and, therefore, cannot isolate his own theory from politics. Furthermore, radical realist theorists presuppose an old understanding of ideology, according to which it would be possible to overcome it, which also contradicts the situated character of realism (Goodhart, 2024, p. 72). Regarding the second misconception, about normativity, Goodhart (2024, pp. 73-74) agrees with political realism in general that much of the prescriptive language of contemporary political theory, especially ideal moral theory, is moralized language about justice, duties, etc. He also considers that theorists who use such language are trying to confer the special authority of morality on their preferred theories. However, he argues that the domain of normativity, which includes a wide range of statements that say how things should be and/or what people should do, is much broader than that of morality. Thus, adopting the Kantian distinction, he states that if morality only has categorical, absolute, and unconditional imperatives, normativity includes hypothetical, circumstantial, contingent, and conditional imperatives, suitable for realistic prescriptions.

Having dispelled these two misconceptions, Goodhart (2024, p. 74) establishes the normativity he considers adequate for a non-radical political realism, the so-called realist prescription. First, this prescription is ideological, in the sense already mentioned, that is, it is situated, based on the values, beliefs, and commitments of the theorists; second, it is not absolute nor does it claim any moral authority, but is conditioned by its substantive ideological commitments and the empirical analyses that inform its normativity. To conclude this proposal, Goodhart (2024, pp. 74-75) anticipates and refutes the possible objection that this is already the situated and conditional way in which political theory offers its prescriptions. To this end, he enumerates four characteristics of the realist

prescription that should differentiate it from the familiar moralistic prescription of ideal moral theories and conventional political theory: first – in the realist prescription, the articulation of values, commitments, and circumstances replaces moral justification; second – realistic prescription does not consider disagreement as error, ignorance, or deception, but as an expected manifestation of inevitable ideological pluralism; third – realistic prescription is aware of the connection between, on the one hand, its methods and theories and, on the other, politics, of which the first two are forms; and fourth – realistic prescription is dialectical, since theory guides action and action guides theory.

Having presented this argument supporting the possibility of political realism making realistic prescriptions capable of guiding political action, with a normativity free of moralism, and in light of the comparison between the two realist taxonomies presented, it remains to be answered whether there are persuasive reasons to exclude such a possibility for non-ideal theories. As already seen in the second section, just like realism, non-ideal theories are situated and avoid idealizations, unlike ideal moral theories. We also saw that the difference between being fact-centered, like realism, or sensitive to them, like non-ideal theories, does not allow us to judge that the latter distance themselves from such facts, but only that they appropriate them in a different way than political realism does. Furthermore, it would not be necessary to deny the previously assumed moral commitment of non-ideal theories, because we have already seen in this section that political realism also has some kind of morality and political ideals, although the uses of both are different in each of those types of theory. Given these comparisons, it seems clear that the four characteristics of realist prescriptions mentioned above, as supposedly capable of differentiating them from the moralistic prescriptions of ideal moral theory and conventional political theory, which would include non-ideal theories, are only one possible specification of the fundamental elements of realist prescriptions alleged by Goodhart, namely, 1 – their situated character, based on the values, beliefs, and commitments of the theorists; 2 – their assumed conditionality and contingency, due to their ideological commitments and the importance given to facts. It turns out that these two elements can also be specified, albeit in a different way, by non-ideal theories, because the fact that these have a prior commitment to a specific normativity or are based on political ideals does not mean that they cannot guide action based on them, in a way that is: 1 – morally permissible, according to the prior normativity to which they are committed; 2 – politically feasible, taking into account the context in which they are embedded, with the respective relevant facts, and 3 – probably effective, through the pursuit of the efficiency of their normativity based on the verification of their applicability.

Final considerations

In this article, we seek to position ourselves in relation to three internal debates within egalitarian liberalism. In the debate between liberalism and perfectionism, we argue that, although Rawls's political liberalism is perceived as an anti-perfectionist theory, it is possible to sustain a liberal political state perfectionism, according to which the State can promote the so-called political virtues without needing to resort to ideals of the good life or excellence related to comprehensive, even if partial, doctrines. These political virtues, which aim at fair cooperation in a democratic society, do not have a fixed or static content, and may include virtues such as tolerance, civility, reasonableness, a sense of fairness, and, depending on the conception of justice adopted to govern the basic structure of society, virtues such as anti-racism and care. The promotion of political virtues is not only legitimate under the parameters of a political liberalism, such as that of Rawls, but necessary for the fact of the majority to be viable in its descriptive and normative dimensions, and not give way to the fact of decline. A liberal political perfectionism becomes even more pressing when confronted with the non-ideal situation of contemporary societies, which have faced, in recent years, a continuous and empirically demonstrated erosion of democracy.

Given the real problem of democratic erosion, liberal political perfectionism takes the form of a non-ideal theory, opening the door to the second debate we analyzed: the confrontation between non-ideal theories and political realism. To this end, we were able to review the division formulated by Rawls in TJ – and maintained in his later works – on ideal and non-ideal theories, in which he establishes an inaugural taxonomy, suggests a division of labor between those parts or forms of theory, defines a hierarchy between both and, finally, defends the focus on the ideal theory. The ideal theory would serve to establish the ultimate goals of social reforms and to define the priority in addressing various injustices, while non-ideal theories are aimed at guiding concrete political action and combating such injustices, linked to the partial (non)compliance of institutions and citizens with principles, which is typical of existing societies.

We also revisit the criticisms of Rawls' formulation on ideal and non-ideal theories, highlighting Goodhart's critique, which complicates the original Rawlsian taxonomy, including political realism in the debate as an opposing pole simultaneously to ideal and non-ideal theories, which, for this author, do not take reality seriously enough. As we have seen, realist political theories, for Goodhart, are fact-centered, situated, avoid idealizations, and refrain from moralizing, while non-ideal theories would be equated with ideal theories by maintaining, like them, prior moral commitments. In contrast to Goodhart, we argue that non-ideal theories are informed by real-

world problems of describing the world as it is, replete with specific injustices that are only revealed as such precisely in the light of a certain normativity, derived from an ideal theory, and whose confrontation constitutes their objective. We also maintain that the situated character and avoidance of idealizations are not exclusive to realist political theories, since non-ideal theories recognize their limited and thus situated character, as well as, by their very definition, avoid the idealizations of ideal theories. Regarding the abstention from moralizing, which would be the fourth characteristic of realist theories, we understand that non-ideal theories, unlike those, have undeniable moral commitments derived from ideal theories, but this does not prevent them from taking reality seriously.

Finally, based on Cozzaglio and Favara's proposal, we show that the commitment of non-ideal theories to normativity does not mean a detachment from the real world that would lead to the impossibility of practical political guidance on the part of such theories. With this, we argue that liberal political perfectionism, taken as a non-ideal theory committed to the normativity of egalitarian political liberalism, whose political ideals are contained, but always imperfectly realized, in the public political culture of liberal democracies, also attributes decisive weight to its descriptive aspect, especially to the “fact of decline,” without which it would not even be formulated. In this sense, such perfectionism meets the three Rawlsian guidelines for non-ideal theories: 1 – moral permissibility, insofar as it is committed only to the ideals present in the public political culture of liberal democracies; 2 – political possibility, since it is about strictly promoting the political virtues linked to the flourishing of such ideals; 3 – probability of effectiveness, insofar as states possess the capacity to profoundly influence the political beliefs of their citizens. Thus, liberal political perfectionism proves capable of guiding political action precisely in its most fundamental case, that of maintaining the conditions that allow for the maintenance and flourishing of liberal democracies.

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