A Little Bit Utopian?

On Erik Olin Wright—Envisioning Real Utopias
(entries for Crooked Timber blog)

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Erik Wright's extended reflection on problems with capitalism, along with his imaginative and rigorous exploration of desirable and viable alternatives, raises telling points about both theory and practice. In the world of practice, modern capitalism is, despite certain virtues, undesirable in certain ways, and his aim is to diagnose the central problems and to begin to construct alternatives. In the arena of theory, Wright tries to move our thinking outside of the usual complacent assumptions about what is possible, but without leaving the constraints of the real world entirely behind. This is a common aspiration, and it bears consideration in its own right. I will put aside Wright's substantive arguments for or against certain social arrangements in order to concentrate on Wright's methodological discussions of feasibility and utopianism. As interesting and important as his substantive suggestions are, I will take seriously his argument that the whole project is framed by a methodology that gives both realism and utopianism their due.

The title's term, "Real utopias," (anticipated by John Rawls's "realistic utopia")[1] suggests that this will be a balancing act. It is intentionally oxymoronic, embracing a tension between two approaches to critical social theory. Are realism and utopianism compatible? There is something appealing about being idealistic. And yet no one, it seems, wants to be accused of being unrealistic. The challenge, plausibly, is to strike some kind of balance. But *utopianism* is a different concept from idealism, much as libertinism is different from liberality. There is no balancing libertinism, as distinct from liberality, with abstinence (any more than it is possible to be a little bit pregnant). Likewise, I think, there is no balancing utopianism, as distinct from idealism, with feasibility. There are, as a conceptual necessity, no abstemious libertines. I contend that, likewise, there is no feasible utopianism. Is there some way to be realistic other than a concern for feasibility? I return to that question toward the end, with a reflection on the "realistic utopianism" of Rawls.

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[1] The concept is used in *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, and in *The Law of Peoples*, both from Harvard University Press, 2001.

This is not, by the way, a quibble about Wright's use of the word, "utopian." Rather, a clearer distinction between utopian thought on one hand, and (merely) relatively idealistic thought that still aims to be practically relevant on the other hand, serves to highlight questions about when, and on what grounds, it is appropriate to capitulate (in theory or in practice) to unfortunate practical constraints. Such capitulation is bound often to be appropriate in practice—even morally mandatory in many cases. But it might yet be capitulation—a concession to, say, the morally poor motives or behavior of individuals or institutions. The fact that we ought to make the concession can hardly turn it into a non-concession, as if all the highest standards have really been met after all. Justice might be utopian or unrealistic, not something we ought, under unfortunate realistic conditions seek to produce (or, perhaps, even to approximate). And I will assume that there is value in knowing whether what is being proposed by a normative political theory is some approximation to justice, or something else altogether—something more realistic but more concessive.

To the extent that some mode of political thought is idealistic, it is proceeding without regard to the constraints of the realistic. By the same token, in the ways in which a project hews to the realistic, it is, in those ways and to that extent, eschewing a more pronounced idealism. In a broad normative project there might be places for each of these modes—they can be combined in that piecemeal way. A meal might combine vegetarian and meat dishes, but no dish is properly thought of as partly meat and partly vegetarian. That is not a vegetarian dish at all. If some approach to critical social theory eschews idealism to some extent on behalf of realism, might we allow that it is utopian to some extent?

Idealism, we should grant, can come in degrees, then, and sometimes very small ones. What about utopianism? Utopianism can mean different things in different contexts, but in political theory it has, I believe, lost its moorings completely if it can encompass even normative theories or practical projects that insist on remaining within the bounds of the feasible. Leave aside for the moment whether there might be (as I believe) merit in some projects that completely ignore the bounds of the feasible. In any case, for better or worse, that is surely the terrain of the utopian. There is appeal in utopianism, in its idealism, of course. But just as no one wants to be accused of being unrealistic, in normative political theory there is the strong pull of the feasible. Even allowing that one can strike a compromise between realism and idealism, maintaining some claim to both attractive descriptions, *utopianism* must surely be defined as eschewing the constraints of the feasible. Whatever the value of utopian thought, that is its price.

Wright seems to have intended the utopian element of his project to lie in his willingness to contemplate heretofore unrealized social and political ar-

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rangements even though they might, for all we know at present, be unachievable. (150)[2] This already indicates an ambivalence about utopian reflection as I understand it—reflection that eschews the constraints of the feasible—an ambivalence that runs through the book. I want to press on the ambivalence, since it is common among those who grapple with their utopian impulses. I will argue that Wright never quite accepts that utopian reflection (as defined here, being distinct from *relatively idealistic* reflection) has any merit at all. As I will put things, Wright's approach is half-utopian. More interestingly, perhaps, I will argue that there is no persuasive justification for that middle way.

Wright might well reject my preference about terminology, but as I have said the issue is not terminological. If you have a better name for theorizing that eschews feasibility, I invite you to substitute it. Another term that can be troubling in these contexts is "feasibility," but Wright navigates this problem adeptly. He usefully distinguishes between "viability" and "achievability." (pp. 22-25.) An arrangement is *viable* if, having been produced for the sake of certain reasons and goals, it is capable of being sustained without undermining those purposes. An arrangement is *achievable* if there is a practical way to produce it, starting from where we are "now"—that is, at the time and in the conditions from which achievability is being assessed. I will look more closely at the idea of achievability below, but there is a fairly clear distinction between whether it is possible (from here) to produce some arrangement, and whether such an arrangement would, if produced, work. These are two dimensions of the more general idea of feasibility. For present purposes, I will define "feasibility" as having these, and only these two dimensions that Wright distinguishes.

It is natural, then, to define a normative social theory as "utopian," when it proceeds without either of the constraints of feasibility, neither achievability nor viability. Wright's two-part analysis of feasibility helps to highlight one way in which he is, I believe, seeking a halfway house. In thinking about alternatives to capitalism, Wright says that he will limit himself to proposals that are, in addition to being desirable, also (as far as we can tell) *viable*: they could work and be sustained. Notably, though, he does not similarly constrain himself by the requirement of achievability—whether it would be possible to produce the arrangements, starting from where we are. Wright's project is not fully utopian, then, since he accepts one of the feasibility constraints, even if not the other. In abstracting away from questions of achievability, Wright's project counts as

[2] Unless otherwise specified, page numbers are for the book. See also, Wright's piece, "Transforming Capitalism through Real Utopias, *American Sociological Review*," XX(X) 1–25 (2012): "…real means proposing alternatives attentive to problems of unintended consequences, self-destructive dynamics, and difficult dilemmas of normative trade-offs. A real utopian holds on to emancipatory ideals without embarrassment or cynicism but remains fully cognizant of the deep complexities and contradictions of realizing those ideals."

more idealistic than it would otherwise be. By the same token, though, by accepting the constraint of viability, his project is rendered less idealistic than it might have been. It is, arguably, only half-utopian.

As against those who might insist that social theory must be realistic, Wright defends his method of leaving aside the constraint of achievability on two grounds:

> …I believe that it is worth thinking about…apparently unachievable possibilities both because it is so difficult to predict what the political circumstances will be decades hence, and because exploring the logic of viable but (apparently) not achievable institutional designs can contribute to the future formulation of achievable innovations." (150-51)

The two defenses of the value of thinking about possibilities that are apparently unachievable, then, are: a) We might be wrong about this, and they might turn out to be achievable, and b) Even if they are unachievable, the exercise of thinking about them can contribute to the formulation of possibilities that are achievable. These are hard claims to deny, and I will grant them.

If there is that two-part case for the value of theorizing outside one of the constraints of feasibility—that of viability—we should ask why that very same case cannot be made for the value of theorizing outside of the other constraint of feasibility: achievability. The two seem to me to be equally plausible. There are the same two defenses of the value of thinking about possibilities that are apparently *not viable*, namely: a) We might be wrong about this, and they might turn out to be viable, and b) Even if they are not viable, the exercise of thinking about them can contribute to the formulation of possibilities that are viable.

It is not clear, then, what argument Wright has for stopping short of fully utopian theorizing—that which abstracts from both constraints of feasibility. He might, like so many, find it uncomfortable to be readily accused of being unrealistic. The question here, though, is whether there is any line of argument offered by Wright, or available to him, that vindicates his reticence about fully utopian theory. His argument against abstracting away from (only) the constraints of viability is just this rhetorical question: "Unless one believes that a viable alternative which would actually reduce [capitalism's] harms is possible, what would be the point in challenging capitalism itself?" (85) But, of course, the same could have been said—though he doesn't say it—against his ignoring the constraints of achievability. It's true that if some better arrangement is viable, and not obviously achievable, we have reason to work on making it achievable (although, not if it is *not* achievable). But the case is symmetrical: if some desirable arrangement is achievable but not obviously viable, we have reason to work on making it viable (though if it *not* viable). It is not as if one of

these, viability, is set by laws of nature while the other, achievability, is subject to our agency.

So we are offered two reasons to ignore one of the feasibility constraints, reasons that would appear to apply also to the other one. And we are given no argument for Wright's preferred approach of accepting one and rejecting the other. This is a halfway house, and that might lend it plausibility in a spirit of balance, or compromise, or moderation, but that comfort should be resisted unless we can vindicate the stance with argument.

I am not suggesting that fully utopian theory is the only legitimate kind, or the best kind, or any such thing (though I am more sympathetic to it than many others). It is obvious that there is a legitimate level of normative theorizing that begins with certain constraints: certain things cannot be changed, or certain things could be changed but will not be, and so on. There are important questions about what should be done given those constraints. In fact, the lack of viability or achievability of certain social arrangements are sometimes good examples of such constraints. I can see the value of proceeding within both constraints, in a concessive realistic mode, as I can see the value of abstracting away from feasibility of both kinds. But even granting the important of concessive theorizing (though not granting it exclusive legitimacy), it is still unclear what value there is in halfway concessive theorizing—respecting constraints of viability while ignoring those of achievability.

Wright nicely divides his critical method into phases, with an initial phase of diagnosis and critique of capitalism, to be followed by a phase investigating the viability of various alternatives. (10-11) "Diagnosis and critique" is the name of the first full section of chapter 2, in which Wright explicates a conception of social and political justice according to two principles of justice. The notable thing about these principles for present purposes is that, as formulated, they are capable of grounding a moral critique of social and political arrangements even prior to any inquiry into the viability (much less the achievability) of alternatives. That is, an arrangement can fail to meet the standard even if there is no viable alternative, as we can see if we look at the formulation of his two principles (abridging the second one for brevity):

> *Social justice*: In a socially just society, all people would have broadly equal access to the necessary material and social means to live flourishing lives.

> *Political justice*: In a politically just society, all people would have broadly equal access to the necessary means to participate meaningfully in decisions about things which affect their lives… (p. 12)

Each of the two principles requires, as a matter of justice, a kind of equal access. A given social arrangement can, in principle, be assessed with respect to whether these two kinds of access are, indeed, equally possessed by all individuals. If not, the arrangement counts as unjust to some degree. According to Wright's conception of justice, as given by these two principles, neither the fact nor the degree of a society's injustice requires any inquiry into whether there are viable or achievable alternative arrangements available. Call this the *alternative-independence* of the principles.

What is striking about this is that, as we have seen, Wright casts aspersions on the project of theorizing without attention to the viability of alternatives. That would seem to imply that the two principles are not themselves valuable standards. Granted, he has a second phase of inquiry devoted to investigation of viable alternatives. But the question is whether he is right that the first phase has no value without the second. It is, of course, appropriate to *ask* what interest or value there would be in this first phase taken by itself but there might be an answer. What interest or value is there in either identifying the standards of justice themselves, or in determining whether some given (actual or conceivable) society meets them, or to what degree they fall short? Clearly, the interest would be great if there were (as the second phase might show) some available social alternative that is not unjust, or which is at least less unjust than some unjust status quo. What interest is there, though, in understanding whether a society meets these principles of justice if, for all we know at this first stage, there might be no available less unjust alternative?

I want to leave this skeptical question hanging for a moment, rather than canvassing possible answers to it. Instead, consider an indirect approach. Suppose that in a following chapter Wright were to proceed, as part of the first phase, to uncover with his characteristic power and clarity numerous ways in which capitalist social arrangements violate, or tend to lead to the violation, of those two attractive principles of justice. Since the principles are met or violated by certain capitalist arrangements regardless of whether there are viable alternatives (the principles demand no such finding), this extended diagnosis and critique could proceed without going into the separate and complex task of assessing the availability of alternatives that would be more just in the specified respects.

As it happens, Wright does go on to do something rather like this, though not quite. He turns, in Chapter 3 (the first chapter in Part I of the book which is called "Diagnosis and Critique") to answer the question, "What's So Bad About Capitalism?" We have, by that point, the two principles of justice in the background, though most of the discussion in Chapter 3 proceeds without any particular connection to those principles. Even so, many, though not all, of the eleven criticisms that Wright mounts against capitalism themselves have the

same alternative-independence that I have identified in the principles of justice. Here are several of the clearer examples:

> 6. Capitalism has a systematic bias toward consumerism
> 7. Capitalism is environmentally destructive.
> 8. Capitalist commodification threatens important broadly held values.
> 9. … fuels militarism…
> 10. …corrodes community.
> 11. …limits democracy. (p. 37)

The alternative-independence of Wright's normative framework is not only in the structure of the two abstract principles, then. Much of his diagnosis and critique of capitalism also proceeds independently of the complex questions about whether there are superior viable alternatives. Suppose there were no such alternatives. That would not change the facts about whether capitalism is environmentally destructive, fuels militarism, or limits democracy.

Return, now, to the skeptical question, about whether there is any interest in a diagnosis or critique that proceeds (as phase one does) independently of whether there are better alternatives. To suppose that there is no interest apart from the question of alternatives, is to suppose, with great implausibility, that *until* we know whether there are viable alternatives, there is no interest or value in learning that capitalism not only violates the two stated principles of justice, but is also destructive of democracy, community, environment, and peace. Even if (what is not at all obvious) the interest of these indictments stems entirely from the reasons they provide for trying, if at all possible, to devise superior alternatives, this would be enough to establish that the critique has great interest and value already—*before* we know whether there are viable alternatives.

Even this arguably locates too much of the value of critique in the availability of alternatives. It seems to assume that the interest in the criticisms of capitalism, now granted to precede any knowledge about viable alternatives, is a provisional interest only. On this view, the interest is still alternative-driven, and would lapse if it were known for certain that no superior viable alternative is available. It was the reasonable hope for available alternatives which, on this view, gave the criticisms their interest.

This suggestion is extremely implausible. It is entirely conceivable to me (I don't say likely) that superior alternative arrangements to modern capitalism are not feasible. As I imagine facing such a sad realization, the suggestion that it would no longer be of any interest or importance to know that existing arrangements are corrosive, destructive, and dangerous in certain ways beggars belief. I realize, because I have seen it, that some who are engaged in critical social and political theory seem to think that the only question that is of any

real value to a human being is "what is to be done?" or that rather than bothering with "interpreting" the world, "the point is to change it." Obviously, and for the reasons I have just given, I think that is not true. And Wright is under some pressure to agree with me, against the chorus of realism and practicality. His principles of justice, and many of his criticisms of capitalism, pack a big punch prior to any investigation of whether there is anything to be done about it.

I have said that much of Wright's critique of capitalism could, given the formulation of the principles of justice and of many of the eleven criticisms, have proceeded prior to any attention to the availability of viable alternatives. However, this is not quite how Wright does, in fact, proceed. Rather, Chapter 3 is seasoned with assertions of the pointlessness of critique without available alternatives. For example, "Unless one believes that a viable alternative which would actually reduce these harms is possible, what would be the point in challenging capitalism itself?" (85) If what Wright meant by "challenging" capitalism were actually bringing it down, as distinct from engaging in critical theory, then the relevance of good alternatives would be pressing. But Wright is explaining why he advocates critically *theorizing* with constraints of viability in mind. So it is fair to object that, as Wright's own conception of justice and injustice strongly suggest, the value of critical theoretical evaluation of capitalism does not depend on the availability of viable alternatives.

Of course, if one insists that critical theory cannot be divorced from efforts to effect actual change, Wright might be interpreted as saying that such a critical-cum-transformative project is, given its transformative aspect, worthless if there are no viable alternatives. The answer to this, however, would be that these two aspects can indeed be prised apart. It's as easy as acknowledging, if necessary, that capitalism is environmentally destructive, fuels militarism, limits democracy, or violates egalitarian principles of justice even though (suppose) transformation would be unwise since there is no viable alternative. Wright's choice to work within the constraints of viability, so far as we understand them, is not dictated by the very enterprise of critical social theorizing, then. It may yet be dictated by a more specific enterprise: critical social theorizing that is intended to produce recommendations toward producing more just and desirable social forms—an enterprise of obvious value. But that is a concessive enterprise, a compromise with, among other things, the morally unfortunate facts about how people will tend, under various conditions, to act. That valuable enterprise is not particularly utopian, though no less valuable for that.

Certain constraints of a realistic kind might be tempting if we thought of justice as a species of moral obligation. If I am not able to do something, then it is hard (I think) to accept that it is nevertheless morally obligatory that I do it. If that is right, then there is this modest constraint of realism in the case of obligation: if an agent is not able to do something then any theory that says

they are obligated to do it is false. What an agent is or is not able to do is a difficult philosophical question, of course. Is quitting smoking within Lara's ability? Is living up to his (believed) religious duties without fail within Patrick's ability? Nevertheless, the idea that obligation entails ability at least would tell us what connections there are between answers to these questions about ability and conclusions about obligations: if the agents are not able, then they are not obligated. If the requirements of justice are moral obligations on some (individual or collective) agent or agents, then it would arguably follow that social scenarios that are not within any individual or collective ability are not morally required, and so there is no injustice when they are not brought about. If it cannot be done, then justice does not require that it be done.

It is important to see that even on this obligation model of justice, the so-called "constraints" of achievability and viability comprise, among other things, forms of motivation and behavior for which people are responsible. If socialism is, as some claim, infeasible because people are too self-centered, this hardly shows that they are *unable* to act otherwise. And if they are able, justice might yet obligate them to do so, however unlikely it might be that they will comply.[3]

Moreover, not all our thinking about justice obviously fits into that obligation model, however. Wright is hardly alone in thinking that justice is equality of something, be it resources, welfare, opportunity, or in Wright's principles, "access." This violates the obligation model, since inequality is inequality whether or not equality is possible. Wright sees this. In a companion piece to the book he writes, "It may well be that for all sorts of reasons it is difficult—or even impossible—to fully remedy this global injustice. But a damaging inequality does not become socially just simply because of the difficulty [DE: or, by implication from the previous sentence, impossibility] of changing things." That is, if justice is equal access (to whatever), then unequal access is presumably a shortfall from justice. Justice, on this view, requires equality, it's true. The requirement is not, however, the kind of requirement represented by obligation. When we say that beer requires hops we do not mean that anyone is obligated to add hops, but only that it is not beer without the hops. Similarly, egalitarian views hold that where (certain) equality is lacking, justice is lacking. To say that some condition is unjust, then, does not commit us to saying that there is anything that anyone can do about it, or that justice is or ever was possible. On egalitarian views (and that same obviously goes for many distributive principles) requirements of justice, unlike moral obligations, do not, as such, require anything practical of anyone.

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[3] I develop this line of thought at greater length in "Human Nature and the Limits (If Any) of Political Philosophy," in *Philosophy & Public Affairs,* Summer 2011.

Wright's principles, as we have seen, are egalitarian and alternative-independent in just this way. For that reason, he is not in a position to bring in constraints of practical possibility on the grounds that justice, being a moral requirement, presuppose ability. Of course, one might bring them in precisely because one is concerned with questions about what we ought to do under real, if unfortunate, circumstances, but Wright is not concerned with that. He brackets questions about achievability—questions about what can be achieved from here given the real facts. It remains unclear, then, what justification there is for admitting half of the considerations of feasibility, while defending the value of leaving the other half to the side.

I have argued that whatever the merit might be of keeping it real—of working theoretically within one or both of the constraints of feasibility—it is important not to pretend that those constraints are costless. If true justice is not achievable and/or not viable, then we ought not to aim for it. But it would take more than that to show that it was not really what justice required, or that there is no great value in theorizing about it. Are we sure, in advance, that justice is feasible? On what grounds? No matter what people and circumstances might turn out to be like? Wright is not dumbing justice itself down to fit within the constraints of feasibility. His conception of justice is, as we've seen, alternative-independent to a large degree. His project is not, mainly, to develop that conception of justice, but to help to understand what practical possibilities their might be for advancing the cause of social justice in the world. Many of the limits or constraints that agents will face will be facts about how people will tend, defensibly or not, to act under various conditions.

Having granted that this concessive level of normative theorizing is of unquestionable importance, and yet questioned the halfway nature of Wright's utopianism, I want also to raise doubts about even the halfway *realism* that Wright proposes to respect—the constraint of viability. Recall, to say that a social system is viable is to say that (roughly, which is all Wright attempts with this concept) if it could be achieved, it is not bound to undermine the values and reasons for which it was implemented. Wright may have in mind the possibility of a system which, if achieved, would meet his egalitarian principles of justice (and, I suppose, would fare relatively well with regard to his other alternative independent critiques of capitalism), but which would be bound or likely to malfunction, unravel, or simply evolve in ways that undo or outweigh the value of having such a system.

There would be good reason not to bring about such a hopeless system, of course. But when we are reflecting on what a just society would be like, it is important to keep in mind that among the factors that might weaken or corrupt such an arrangement might well be facts about disgraceful human motivations and proclivities. Thinkers differ about whether there are any such things that could not be socially overcome, but suppose that there were. Suppose

(what is hardly unimaginable) that humans under any morally permissible social arrangements would remain, in significant measure (if only statistically), racist, or xenophobic, or predatory. In that case it might turn out that the only possible stable arrangements are those that include significant inequality of opportunity or other injustice. Let's hope not. But the point is that the content of social justice is (as Wright's alternative-independent conception of justice indicates) not properly thought of as something that must compromise with the constraints on stability or other dimensions of viability. *We* must compromise, of course. We must try to do the best we realistically can with one eye on justice and other values, and another eye on the cold hard facts about what can be achieved and maintained. It would be a mistake, though, (not one I'm accusing Wright of) to suppose that the result of our compromise between justice and various constraints is appropriately called justice. This is no more convincing than saying that a compromise between happiness and virtue is happiness, or that buying a compromise between a fast car and a cheap car counts as the buying a fast car after all.

It is important, in a project such as Wright's, to keep in mind the difference between the question of what would be a just society, and the question of what would be the best compromise, in practice, between justice and other values such as viability, achievability, and other things. What we should *do*, in light of all the facts as best we can ascertain them, is by no means guaranteed to be to aim to produce a just society. It cannot be assumed, either, that it is to aim to approximate a just society, since there is no guarantee that this would be a way to approximate its justice, as we know from the so-called "problem of second best." What we ought to do *given* facts about such things as achievability and viability is, for that reason, not a very utopian question.

Rawls, as I have said, adopts the same oxymoronic label of "realistic utopianism." In his explanation of this idea, Rawls sketches an approach that can be usefully compared with Wright's. I detect what may be a difference between a certain minimal kind of realism, and giving any weight at all to feasibility. This may reopen a legitimate claim to the idea of "realistic utopianism" after all. Before turning to Rawls, recall Wright's constraint of viability: as I argued above, he sees no point in critically theorizing about social arrangements unless they could realistically work without undermining the reasons for which they are thought desirable. The question I want to focus on now is this: What if we have reason to doubt some arrangement's viability, but only because we have reason to expect that people will, optionally, behave in a morally poor fashion? We do not need to contend that it is beyond people's abilities to keep their selfishness within moderate bounds in order to *expect* that they will not do so even under any possible institutional and historical conditions (I don't assert this, but only consider it). If this is what we had most reason to expect, does Wright's constraint of viability banish fruitful theorizing about social arrange-

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ments in which people were better than we expect (though not better than they could *possibly* be)?

Notice that it would be open to Wright to deny that there are such historically invariant motivational features of people. Many influenced by Marx and Mill are suspicious of claims to know what people are like in their very nature. It is unwarranted, on that view, to presume to know that people are naturally highly selfish when the only evidence we have for this is a limited course of recorded history so far, exhibiting only a limited range of social arrangements and historical narratives. In this spirit, Wright's constraint of viability would not legitimately warrant our excluding arrangements on the grounds that, from what we know about people so far, we don't know whether they would behave in the required ways. It would avoid that kind of conservatism on epistemological grounds: we shouldn't be so sure.

But this only takes things so far. Presumably, and whether or not we need to rely on any kind of stable human nature, we are not utterly barred from anticipating how people are likely to behave under certain conjectured social arrangements. And I expect Wright to agree with my rejection of that kind of skepticism. It would no more warrant ruling in certain (say, less selfish) behaviors then it would warrant ruling them out. If certain patterns of behavior are legitimately posited in the kind of social theorizing Wright endorses, then there must be some standards that determine which behaviors can and which ones cannot be so posited. So my question arises at this point: is some arrangement's viability dependent on what we reasonably predict about behavior? Call this *predictive realism*. If so, what are we to make of the fact that we might have good reason to predict morally poor behavior? Are we still theorizing about justice if we are forced to lower the bar to whatever standard we happen to have reason to expect people to meet? What if we do not have good reason to expect people ever to overcome significantly unjust levels of racism, selfishness, or aggression?

An alternative conception of viability is glimpsed in Rawls's brief remarks about his idea of "realistic utopianism." It might look, at first glance, as if "realistic" indicates a predictive realism, the kind of questionable capitulation to moral flaws that I have just been troubling about. It is tempting for political theorists who are especially fond of "realistic" theorizing to read Rawls as a fellow traveler. On this reading, the "realistic" in "realistic utopia" is meant to rule out whatever is "unrealistic," including anything that we all know is very unlikely ever to be achieved. If, as many think, any very high moral standards are unlikely to be achieved, then this approach (hoping to take support from Rawls) would deny that appropriate normative theorizing ever sets such high standards.

There are several reasons to doubt whether this is what Rawls is saying. Rawls says, following Rousseau, that he proposes to confine his theory's de-

mands to "persons' moral and psychological natures and how that nature works within a framework of political and social institutions." (*Law of Peoples*, p. 7) Such an appeal to people's natures (he never speaks of a unitary human nature, for what that's worth) raises as many questions as it answers. In particular, what should we count as part of people's moral and psychological natures? If we believe that people will, quite reliably and predictably, fall short of certain high moral standards, is this enough to show that such standards are beyond human nature and so ruled out from the start?

Maybe not. Rawls quotes Rousseau approvingly as follows: "The limits of the possible in moral matters are less narrow than we think. It is our weaknesses, our vices, our prejudices, that shrink them…" (Rawls *Law of Peoples* p. 7. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, book II, chap. 12, para. 2.) If I understand Rousseau's meaning, he should have said, "…*seem* to shrink them." This suggests a rather different view of the limits of our natures. If weaknesses, vices, and prejudices play a significant role in human behavior, and if we expect them always to do so, then we cannot infer anything about the limits of the possible from the limits of what we expect people to do. We expect them to fall short of standards, even though it would be within their abilities to meet them.

On this prescriptive realism, how are we to estimate what "limits of the possible" are imposed by people's "natures"? Rawls proposes to stay within "persons' *moral and* psychological natures," not just their psychological natures, but what does this mean? It might mean that the observation that certain things are characteristic of human psychology is not yet enough to show that being different is beyond their abilities. Having a moral nature seems to mean partly that we have abilities that go beyond our inclinations and proclivities. The "realism" in Rawls's realistic utopianism is not the usual capitulation to the moral failures we expect people always to have. It is not a dumbing down of justice in order to increase the expectation that it could someday be achieved. It seems to be compatible with the thought that justice might require things of people that it is doubtful they will ever (perfectly or even nearly) achieve. It is the insistence on the standard of justice being one that beings like us are capable, in principle, of achieving (that is its realism), however unlikely that might seem. To contrast this with what I have called predictive realism, I propose to call this *prescriptive realism*: justice is not to require motives or behaviors that are outside of people's abilities as a matter of humans' moral and psychological natures (though it may require motives and behaviors that we do not expect, as a predictive matter, to be met). Still, I grant, it is not entirely clear what constraints our natures do place on theorizing about justice. What kinds of things should be counted as not in our natures, on some ground other than the observation that we are not very likely to do it?

I expect Rawls, in a spirit that Wright seems likely to endorse, would prefer to err on the side of possibility: to put the burden on one who claims that cer-

tain behavioral stipulations are precluded by our moral and psychological natures. What I am less sure of, though, is whether Wright's standard of "viability" would be interpreted by him as more in accord with what I have called predictive realism (for which I have raised a challenge), or the less restrictive prescriptive realism that I have tentatively attributed to Rawls. We have seen that Wright does not accept prescriptive realism, since he acknowledges that his principles of justice would not be refuted by their being impossible to achieve. Still, Wright might not intend the constraint of viability as a constraint on justice itself, and so I still wonder whether he counts an arrangement as viable even if we can be quite certain that, while people could maintain it without unintended bad or destructive consequences, they will not do so. That would be akin to Rawls's prescriptive realism. If not, it would seem to inherit the problems I have posed for predictive realism.

Rawls, as I'm reading him here, suggests that the appropriate requirement of viability gives nothing to the constraints imposed in practice by what we genuinely expect and predict people and institutions to be like. Rather, what matters are only deeper constraints that are beyond people's abilities or even their natures to change. The question is not whether there is any real chance of such a system working, given what we have most reason to expect of people and institutions. The question is what *explains* the motives and behavior that might block its viability. Rawls suggests, following Rousseau, that if the explanation lies in motives and behavior that are not dictated by nature or necessity, such as culpable levels of selfishness and venality, then even if these obstacles are entirely to be expected, justice (or moral obligation) might legitimately require more—though otherwise not.[4] I'm not sure whether Prof. Wright agrees, but if he does, then I would be less sure that this minimal content for "realistic" counts as a concern with feasibility after all. That is, that kind of prescriptive realism might (at least better) warrant the name "utopian."

For my own part, for what it's worth, I think there is value and importance not only in Wright's brand of "pragmatic idealism"[5] (this term I will allow!), but also in normative political theory that investigates standards such as social justice, fully facing the possibility that meeting these standards may not be feasible. This is not the place to defend its value, and I mention it only to point out that this may be (not a halfway house, but rather) the proper home of uto-

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[4] I do not myself see how even our natures can play this role except insofar as that bears on our abilities. There might be important facts about our natures, such as facts about what we do or do not care about, that do not impugn our abilities, and these should not be used to contract the requirements of justice. Or so I argue in, "Human Nature and the Limits (If Any) of Political Philosophy," *op. cit.*

[5] Wright uses this term in "Transforming Capitalism..." *op. cit.* at p. 9. (I'm not sure if it also occurs in the book.)

pian social and political theory. I do not intend the slightest denigration of non-utopian pragmatic idealistic thought of the sort represented by Wright's book, but it is important, I think, to understand the difference.[6]