Federico Zuolo

BEING REALISTIC WITHOUT REALISM. FEASIBILITY AND EFFICACY IN NORMATIVE POLITICAL THEORIES

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Federico Zuolo

Being Realistic without Realism.
Feasibility and Efficacy in Normative
Political Theories

Federico Zuolo is currently Research Fellow in Political philosophy at the Department of Political Science, University of Pavia. In 2005-6 he was visiting student at the Université Paris X (Nanterre), in 2009 visiting scholar at the Cambridge University, and in 2012 visiting scholar at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra of Barcelona. His research interests include: the concepts of respect and toleration, group rights, the treatment owed to minorities in contemporary liberal democracies (in particular exemptions from the law), questions of feasibility and efficacy of normative political theories. He also worked extensively on issues and authors in the history of political philosophy, among which in particular Plato, Xenophon, and Spinoza. He published a number of articles in diverse international and Italian journals: *European Journal of Political Theory, Utopia and Utopianism, Rivista di Filosofia, Teoria Politica, Filosofia Politica, Il Politico.*

e-mail: federico.zuolo@unipv.it

The **Comparative Politics and Public Philosophy Lab (LPF)**, directed by Maurizio Ferrera, is a Programme of the Centro Einaudi supported by Compagnia di San Paolo. It looks at the transformation of the political sphere in contemporary democracies, with a specific focus on the relationships between the policy choices and the value frameworks in which such choices are, or ought to be, carried out. The reference here is to the "reasonable pluralism" singled out by John Rawls as an essential feature of political liberalism.

The underlying idea is that implementing forms of "civilized" politics is desirable as well as feasible. And, as far as the Italian political system is concerned, it is also urgently needed, since the system appears to be poorly prepared to deal with the challenges emerging in many policy areas: from welfare state reform to the governance of immigration, from the selection criteria in education and in public administration to the regulation of ethically sensitive issues.

In order to achieve this end, LPF adopts both a descriptive-explanatory approach and a normative one, aiming at a fruitful and meaningful combination of the two perspectives. Wishing to foster an informed public debate, it promotes theoretical research, empirical case studies, policy analyses and policy proposals.

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ABSTRACT

BEING REALISTIC WITHOUT REALISM.
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When we think that some normative political principles should be action-guiding, we assume that such principles should be in some way *realizable* in social reality. Political philosophers usually address this problem by requiring that what is prescribed by normative theories should be in some sense *feasible*. In this paper I claim that although the feasibility requirement accounts for some important dimensions concerning the general issue of realizability, in particular those revolving around the *constraints* posed by the world on the implementation of a normative theory, it does not cover all the issues at stake, in particular those concerning *how* such constraints may be overcome and how a normative theory can be put into practice. In this paper I shall propose to address this problem by appealing to the notion of efficacy. In ordinary language, efficacy means the capacity to obtain the desired result. But, given the impossibility of providing *ex ante* criteria to account for the practical success of the implementation of normative theories, I shall propose a minimal notion of efficacy, one based on the idea that the prevention of possible failures is a preliminary step and an indirect way to achieve practical success. I shall propose three criteria drawn from practical rationality to assess the plausibility of failure prevention strategies:
1. *likelihood* of the preconditions,
2. *efficiency* of the actions implementing the theory,
3. *reliability* of the normative plan.
On the basis of these criteria, an implementation plan is efficacious if it is parsimonious in assuming favourable preconditions (1), efficient in using resources (2), and capable of preventing possible unintended consequences (3). Finally, I show the theoretical and general interest of the idea of efficacy.

BEING REALISTIC WITHOUT REALISM. FEASIBILITY AND EFFICACY IN NORMATIVE POLITICAL THEORIES

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the reasons why we usually consider normative principles included in political theories very important is because they can provide guidance for political action. By this I do not claim that all the aims of normative political theories are reducible to providing guidance for action. Indeed, normative political theories may be intended simply to provide criteria to assess current states of affairs or to think about what is just, irrespective of whether it matters in practice or not.[1] But when we think that normative principles should be action-guiding, we assume that such principles should be in some way *realizable* in social reality. Political philosophers usually address this problem by requiring that what is prescribed by normative theories should be in some sense *feasible*. In this paper I claim that although the feasibility requirement accounts for some important dimensions concerning the general issue of realizability, in particular those revolving around the *constraints* posed by the world on the implementation of a normative theory, it does not cover all the issues at stake, in particular those concerning *how* such constraints may be overcome and how a normative theory can be put into practice. To account for these latter issues, I propose to employ the notion of efficacy.

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this paper is twofold: first, I shall show the limitations of the traditional responses—based on feasibility considerations—to the problem of realizability of normative theories by pointing out how feasibility considerations capture only the constraints dimension of realizability; second, I shall propose the notion of efficacy to grasp the other part of realizability and address the problem of how such constraints may be overcome.

The paper will proceed as follows. In the second section I shall outline the main features of the notion of feasibility, discussing the merits and limits of a constraint-based approach. In particular I shall argue that such a perspective leaves neglects a fundamental dimension of realization, namely that concerning *how* constraints may be overcome. In the third section I shall analyze the notion of efficacy

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[1] For a fact-free view uninterested in practical requirements, see Cohen 2008. One might argue also that evaluative theories of justice do have relevance for practice and that, accordingly, they should meet the condition of action guidingness, though maybe in a different sense. However, in this paper I do not want to argue for this and delve into this thorny metaethical issue.

as we usually conceive of it, namely according to the idea of practical success. I shall argue that this *ex post* perspective cannot provide a reliable criterion to assess *ex ante* the possible implementation of normative theories. Given the impossibility of providing *ex ante* criteria to account for the practical success of the implementation of normative theories, I shall propose a minimal notion of efficacy, one based on the idea that the prevention of possible failures is a preliminary step and an indirect way to achieve practical success. In the fourth section I shall propose three criteria (likelihood, efficiency, and reliability) drawn from practical rationality to assess the plausibility of failure prevention strategies. In the final section, I shall better qualify the purpose and limitations of my argument, and show its relevance for political philosophy.

2. WHAT REALIZABILITY AND FEASIBILITY CONSIST IN

When we question the practical possibility of a certain normative theory or, better, its implementation scheme and its institutional setting, we ask whether such a theory is realizable in practice. But posed in such general terms, the inquiry on realizability risks telling us nothing. Thus, to clarify the notion of realizability, we have to set down and analyze two fundamental distinctions: that between the two dimensions of realizability (accessibility and stability) and that between the two domains of realizability (feasibility and efficacy).

First, realizability may be divided into two dimensions: the first concerning whether the implementation scheme can be put into practice, the second concerning whether it can maintain its properties in a relevant time-frame. The former dimension concerns the *accessibility* of the implementation scheme, the latter its *stability*. As will become clearer in what follows, this distinction also applies to the two specific sub-domains of realizability: feasibility and efficacy.

To anticipate what we shall see in greater detail below, feasibility considerations respond to the question "*what* hinders the realization of this plan? And to what extent does it do so?"; whereas efficacy considerations respond to the question "if possible, *how and in what way* can such constraints and limitations be overcome?".

Why do I hold that stability is part of realizability in general, and therefore also, as we shall see below, of feasibility and efficacy? Consider this example. We have to assess whether the construction of a wooden bridge without pillars, 10km long and in a zone with strong winds, is realizable. If there is a way to build it, thus satisfying the condition of accessibility, but it immediately collapses once the wind blows or there's car traffic, wouldn't we say that this bridge is *unrealizable*? This example is meant to show that accessibility considerations tell us only whether something can seemingly be put into practice, but not whether such a thing serves the purpose it was made for when it is used or as time passes by. Needless to say,

when we make an artefact we usually take into consideration both issues. A political example may help us articulate this distinction better. Consider the case of a communist plan for centralized control of all economic activities. Suppose there's a party which seizes power and imposes it on a country by banning private enterprise, establishing the price of goods, and using force to discourage private exchange. Thus, we might say that such a plan is accessible, for the constraints to its implementation (opposition by other parties and all persons entitled to private property) have been overcome. But we may easily suppose that, after a while, it does not work because private consumers cannot purchase many goods and so a black market is created. Would we still say that such a plan is realizable? Wouldn't it be important to consider also its stability, that is, its capacity to achieve its intended goal through time?

The second distinction to bear in mind is that between feasibility and efficacy. As said, the distinction between accessibility and stability applies to both feasibility and efficacy. Now let us have a closer look at the idea of feasibility. By pointing at the specificity of the idea of feasibility and its limits, we shall see below how efficacy complements feasibility to cover the whole spectrum of realizability.

In the current debate there is wide agreement on the idea that feasibility should be framed as a set of *constraints*, hard and soft (or absolute and non absolute).[2] *Hard constraints* might be quite easily identifiable (no violation of physical and logical laws). *Soft constraints* include psychological features of individuals, traditions, social and economic settings of the world that hinder the realization of the proposed ideal. Call the test on whether a theory passes hard constraints 'H-feasibility', the test on soft constraints 'S-feasibility'.[3] Both H-feasibility and S-feasibility apply to access and stability. For instance, hard constraints on the accessibility of the implementation of a theory concern physical and biological constraints (e.g. human mortality), whereas soft constraints concern traditions and current political settings that hinder, but do not make impossible, the implementation of a theory.

Hard constraints define feasibility as a binary notion, soft constraints as a scalar one. The test on hard feasibility establishes whether the implementation of a theory is feasible or not; whereas the test on soft feasibility checks how much it is feasible in a continuum between zero (infeasible) and 1 (completely feasible).[4] Some accounts of feasibility[5] interestingly and correctly argue that soft constraints (constituted, for instance, by institutional and economic settings, traditions, cultural binds, and so on) should be seen dynamically, as social reality is to a large extent malleable.

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[2] See in general Cowen 2007.

[3] I borrow the distinction between hard and soft constraints (also called absolute and non absolute) from Pablo Gilabert and Holly Lawford-Smith, whose works reformulate the debate in a convincing manner.

[4] I draw all these considerations from Gilabert and Lawford-Smith 2012 (http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2011.00936.x/abstract).

[5] See Gilabert 2009.

Now it is time to assess whether feasibility considerations make sense of all that we have in mind when we talk of realizability. It is true that the way the world is structured looks like a set of constraints on our actions and plans. However, with a view to understanding soft constraints as malleable, a 'constraint-based perspective' might not be fully appropriate. First, portraying the way the social world is in terms of constraints does not capture all the issues at stake, in particular it leaves out those concerning *how* a theory might be put into practice.

Second, a constraint-based view of social reality sees the social world as a set of unchangeable 'settings', that are stable and limit those social changes endorsed by theories of justice. Although this view is to a certain extent correct and also inevitable, it risks being misleading if not accompanied by other considerations concerning the way in which the constraints may be overcome, as it were, for the extent to which an arrangement of the social world is a constraint, thus limiting the social action based on the principles of a theory, is unknown before an attempt to change reality actually takes place. This is true both because of the epistemic limitations suffered by human beings—who are not endowed with a hypothetical 'perfect social technology'[6]—and because of a possible misrepresentation of the social world as only a set of constraints, rather than also as a set of possibilities. I shall not address here the structural problem of epistemic limitation, for this would require a discussion on which descriptive theories of the social world are actually true.[7] I focus only on the constraint-based view of feasibility.

The representation of the social world as a set of constraints (including traditions, social and economic arrangements, human psychology) is inaccurate precisely when we are considering the possibility of transformation. The world as it is can be both a set of constraints and a set of resources (and we don't know how much it is a set of resources or constraints before trying to implement something). That is, the world in its physical and social dimensions is both a set of factors preventing and hindering the implementation, or making it more difficult, and also a set of factors, which do not prevent or hinder the implementation, but rather make it possible or even facilitate it. When I say that the world is also a set of resources, by this I mean, first, that the physical and social world makes the realization *practically possible*, making it real that something conceived of in theory may actually exist; and, second, that, when a practical plan is actually brought about, physical and social features of the world may turn out to be factors that make the implementation easier than expected. In short, by resources I mean both neutral factors enabling the very possibility of realizing something in practice and facilitating factors that make it easier.

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[6] On the idealized hypothesis of a 'perfect technology of justice', see Ackerman 1980.

[7] A general stance on this, although from the point of view of law, is given by Hart: "It is a feature of the human predicament (and so of the legislative one) that we labour under two connected handicaps whenever we seek to regulate, unambiguously and in advance, some sphere of conduct by means of general standards to be used without further official direction of particular occasions. The first handicap is our relative ignorance of facts; the second is our relative indeterminacy of aim." (Hart 1961, 125). Emanuela Ceva called this "the limited predictive power of theory" (Ceva 2007, 370).

A constraint-based perspective is a *static perspective* that tells us little of how social change may *dynamically* be put in place. Therefore, if a theory portrays the world only as a set of constraints, it risks adopting a partial perspective, and fails to recognize those features of the natural and social world that might contribute to its realization in a dynamic way.[8] The distinction between hard and soft constraints is very important and preliminary to further considerations. A theory violating hard constraints is clearly untenable, and an important preliminary question revolves around how many constraints are to be considered hard (for instance, are psychological features of individuals—such as the Rawlsian assumption of limited altruism—part of hard biological constraints like human mortality?)[9]. However, once this distinction is set down, it follows that only soft constraints may be overcome, but a pure constraint-based perspective tells us nothing of how such soft constraints may be overcome.

From this it follows that, even if we were to agree on whether and to what extent a certain theory is feasible, another part of its realizability would left out, in particular that concerning *the way in which* the theory could be put into practice, including the strategy of implementation and how the soft constraints may be overcome. Some assume this is part of the feasibility requirement. My claim here is that it might be better accounted for if we distinguish feasibility from efficacy, as we will see below.

From this it follows that feasibility considerations discharge a fundamental preliminary task in singling out the constraints and their relative weight, thus providing a static analysis on which efficacy considerations apply with a view to overcoming them.

To sum up, feasibility, *qua* constraint-based view, is not the whole story on the issue of realizability and seems partial because
(a) portraying the social world as a set of constraints may hinder a full understanding of the possibilities of realization (the world is also a set of resources);
(b) feasibility leaves unanswered the issue concerning *how* the desired state of affairs is to be put into practice, how soft constraints can be overcome.
To solve such problems I propose to appeal to the notion of efficacy.

To summarize the relations between the notions analyzed so far, consider what follows.
■ *Realizability* concerns the possibility of putting something into practice in the following two dimensions:
– *accessibility*, concerning whether something can be put into practice *ex novo*
– *stability*, concerning whether it is possible to maintain the implementation over time.

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[8] I owe the suggestion to frame this issue in terms of static vs. dynamic perspective to Emanuela Ceva.
[9] This is a very important issue, which however I do not want to discuss, for I prefer to discuss the general plausibility of a constraint-based perspective.

To each of these two dimensions, we could apply feasibility and efficacy consider-
ations, where by
– *feasibility* we understand what prevents or hinders accessibility and stability,
and by
– *efficacy* we inquire how it can be done in accessibility and stability.

Before exploring the notion of efficacy, in order to see how and why it is needed,
let us consider the following example concerning the assessment of feasibility in
access. Consider a communist ideal aimed at the abolition of private property.
Suppose we agree it is H-feasible and we debate its S-feasibility. Three trajectories
to bring it about are being proposed by two diverse theories sharing the same
ideal but differing with regard to the ways of implementing it. The first trajectory
envisages a revolution organized by the communist party with the proletariat; the
second trajectory proposes to discuss rationally with the capitalists in order to
convince them to renounce power and private property; the third sees the com-
munist ideal as the automatic end-state of a necessary historical process.

None of these options seem *prima facie* H-infeasible, and their S-feasibility is under
scrutiny. However, we might be ready to argue that one of them is more realizable
than the others. Looking at this issue from the point of view of feasibility, we
should investigate what constraints are preventing, limiting and making the realiza-
tion of this ideal more or less attainable. Building on the feasibility analysis, the
perspective of efficacy, instead, would allow us to devise and assess the rationality
and possibility of success of the different modes of implementation.

Before delving into the exploration of the notion of efficacy, it may be useful to
provide a further qualification of the difference between feasibility and efficacy.
The difference between the two notions does not lie in the scope of their concern,
for, in a sense, efficacy and feasibility share the same object of analysis (that of the
modes of possible realization). They rather differ in the angle of analysis, in so far
as feasibility concerns the constraints, while efficacy the strategies to overcome
them.[10] Moreover, considerations of efficacy apply upon the satisfaction of the
H-feasibility constraints and are meant to assess the possibility to overcome the
soft constraints. If a desired goal is infeasible according to the hard constraints
(e.g. it violates the laws of physics, e.g. it assumes that human beings are immortal
or that resources are unlimited), efficacy does not apply.[11]

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[10] It is worth mentioning Mark Jensen (2009)'s approach, the merit of which is that of providing a
view of practical possibility that is not completely reduced to or heavily based on the idea of constraints.
His view, indeed, is based on an analysis of the notion of abilities (synchronic/diachronic, direct/indirect
abilities) that tries to capture the temporal dimension, the practical possibility and the capacity of individ-
uals, as well as collectivities, of learning other abilities. I think this approach goes in the right direction,
and I have no major objection to this view *per se*. In what follows, however, I would like to show the
merit of my approach emphasizing how it is based on the analysis of the properties of the collective
actions (dependence on luck and resources, efficiency and reliability).

[11] Erik Olin Wright outlined an updated Marxist ideal employing a distinction between categories
within the domain of realizability that might usefully be compared to mine. He says that the second task
of emancipator social science (upon the completion of the first task criticizing and diagnosing the social

3. WHAT EFFICACY IS

How can we say that a theory can be efficacious or not? We must preliminarily admit that discourses on efficacy are not usually a standard philosophical concern. Rather, this issue is more frequently addressed by other disciplines, such as management and marketing studies (concerning the efficacy of a market plan…), international studies (regarding the strategies designed to preserve and strengthen the interests of a state in the international arena), medicine and pharmacology (concerning whether a certain therapy cures the patient), social-psychology[12], and so on. However, as I want to show, the concept of efficacy is also worth considering from the point of view of political philosophy. But to do so, we need to address it in a general manner and plug in some normative elements.

3.1. *Efficacy as success*

What are the criteria to assess whether a certain set of goals may be put into practice in an efficacious manner? In ordinary discourse efficacy is frequently used as an *ex post* criterion: a strategy, a plan or a course of actions may be said to be efficacious if and only if it proved *tout court* successful in practice.

> E1: *Efficacy is the capacity to obtain the desired result.*[13]

This is a success-based definition of efficacy, according to which efficacy is defined as an *ex post* criterion on the basis of what has been effective *de facto*.

However, there is a sense in which efficacy is something more normative and goes beyond the mere fact of practical success. Indeed, practical success might simply mean that a certain strategy, plan or course of actions aiming at a certain goal has been very lucky, despite the fact that the strategy was irrationally or poorly

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problems) is that of providing credible social alternatives. Within this task the preliminary activity is that of showing the *desirability* of the social alternative, the second one is that of showing its *viability* and *achievability* (Olin Wright 2010, 10). The viability analysis provides considerations similar to feasibility, whereas achievability, that is the analysis of whether and how a social alternative may actually be put into practice, is clarified only through a reliance on the third task of emancipator social science, that of elaborating a theory of social *transformation*. The dynamic perspective and the analysis of the diverse strategies to implement a socialist alternative (ruptural, interstitial, and symbiotic transformation) make his theory of transformation functionally analogous to my idea of efficacy.

[12] Here the most important reference is to the theory of self-efficacy outlined by Albert Bandura (1997) according to whom self-efficacy is the set of beliefs of a person concerning her competence and capacities to perform certain actions and achieve desired goals.

[13] Wiens (2012b) has already mentioned the 'efficacy condition' in assessing theories of global justice, in a way that is not incompatible with my account. However, my account of feasibility and efficacy is more general and less applied. "For some P to be *feasible*, it must be true that the causal processes that engender the status quo do not prevent us from implementing P. Hence, to show that P is feasible, one must analyze the actual causal processes that impinge on our capacity to implement P and show that these processes are not likely to block P's implementation. Similarly, for some P to effectively improve upon the status quo, it must be true that P intervenes in or interacts with extant causal processes in ways that generate improvements from the standpoint of justice. Hence, to show that P satisfies the *efficacy* condition, one must analyze the actual causal processes that generate current states of affairs and show that P is likely to interact with these causal processes in justice-enhancing ways." (p. 5, Italics are mine).

designed. But if we place more emphasis on and scrutinize the capacity dimension, we may see that efficacy is not reducible to success. For instance, consider two different plans aiming at the same goal. The first obtains the goal easily, while the second encounters many difficulties but in the end overcomes them. Wouldn't we place more worth on the second? But how could we say this if by efficacy we mean only success?

This is simply to say that by way of a definition of efficacy we cannot content ourselves with the mere fact that the desired goal has actually been put in practice, for the mere factual success is an *ex post* criterion, not a normative and philosophical one. Moreover, the practical success might tell us nothing about the goodness of a plan, which might have been successful just because of lucky circumstances. If the only criterion to assess the practical relevance of a normative theory were the factual success of its prescriptions, political realists would be right, but probably the entire normative enterprise would be undermined—and to agree on this we do not even need to appeal to the famous Kantian argument put forward in *That might be right in theory but it won't work in practice*.[14]

It might be objected, though I would be dissatisfied with this, that the success-based criterion is inevitable, for when we estimate *ex ante* the expected efficacy of an action or a plan, we usually also compare the plan, strategy, type of actions and desired goal at stake to similar cases of successful or unsuccessful outcomes. Therefore, by appealing to similar cases we necessarily appeal to the *ex post* criterion of success. This is to a certain extent inevitable, for many of our assessments are based on past experience. However, this conceptual strategy is suitable only to the extent that
(1) similar conditions are relevant and apply;
(2) past cases of success (or failure) are not dependent on mere lucky circumstances, and do include an action or a plan whose inherent qualities contributed to the successful outcome.
Thus, if similar cases of past success cannot be found, or if condition (2) does not apply, the problem of assessing *ex ante* the efficacy without a success-based criterion is still in place.

In sum, the *ex post* view of efficacy seems to blur the distinction between efficacy as a virtue of an action (or of a plan) and the fact of obtaining the desired result. E1 fails to account for the idea that there should be an inherent quality in the action which expresses the capacity of being conducive to the desired outcome (e.g. despite the difficulties encountered).

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[14] See Kant 1991. However, it should be remarked that the mere criterion of factual success does not always provide evidence in favour of realist theories. Indeed, a number of past pessimist forecasts through which realists of diverse ages levelled the charge of infeasibility against idealist or realist approaches, may be rebutted precisely by virtue of the fact that pessimist forecasts were falsified and idealists' attempts were successful: consider for instance the allegations of infeasibility against contemporary democracy, the social state, or the construction of the European Union (for a more detailed list see Hirschman 1991).

But how can we assess *ex ante* whether a certain way of implementing a desired goal might be efficacious before actually trying to put it into practice? Such a question poses an extraordinary challenge to the epistemic limitations we have in understanding the social world.

In many ordinary cases, we all know that if we do a certain action, we are almost sure to obtain the desired result, in the absence of unforeseen and extraordinary circumstances hindering our plan. But in the cases that are interesting for social actions, such a certainty of efficacy is rare. And this is true in particular when it comes to prescribing collective actions based on principles that aim to change the *status quo*. In such cases, past experience of successful actions is not always a reliable criterion. When confronted with the perspective of social change based on a normative theory, our epistemic limitations make us see the complexity of the social world purely as a matter of constraints to our plan. This perspective, that of feasibility considerations we have seen above, is not false. On the contrary, it is inevitable and, to a certain extent, true.

3.2. *Efficacy as a capacity to increase the probability*

With a view to shedding some light on an *ex ante* perspective, consider the following example. Public institutions want to remedy a situation of poor performance in public secondary schools allegedly caused by teachers' lack of engagement. How should the institutions motivate the teachers? Three strategies are being proposed: public institutions could increase the salary of the teachers, organize a communication campaign promoting the importance of teaching, or say that all those teachers who do not prove sufficiently committed to teaching will be fired. All these strategies are clearly feasible, for there does not seem to be any constraint whose overcoming is particularly hard. Then the feasibility perspective would require us to gauge the soft constraints. But we cannot content ourselves with this preliminary observation, as our interest in knowing what should be done to remedy the situation urges us to make other considerations. And here the idea of efficacy comes into play. Each of us, depending on our vision of the world and of human motivation, would be ready to say that one of these three strategies may be more or less efficacious. Or at least each of us may say that one of the three strategies is very likely to be unsuccessful. But which one of the three is open to debate, and depends very much on the context we consider. On the basis of which criteria can we say that one is more (or less) efficacious than the others? If not, is it possible to know in advance what can be successful? Is it at least possible to know in advance what is most likely not to be successful and cause a failure? To answer this we must first reformulate efficacy as a capacity from an *ex ante* perspective.

Then, with a view to providing a more normative definition of efficacy, one that is not based on the mere criterion of factual success, we should investigate *ex ante*

the capacity of plans and actions to bring about a desired goal.[15] An *ex ante* defini-
tion of efficacy could be the following:

> E2: *Efficacy is the capacity to increase the likelihood of achieving the desired result.*

This definition is still admittedly vague and represents a step forward with respect
to E1 only in so far as it reformulates E1 as a capacity to increase the probabilities.

However, it seems very difficult, if not impossible, at least for the actions and
plans that are interesting for social philosophy, to know in advance what action or
plan can be successfully put into practice before actually trying to do so. A philo-
sophical exploration of such issues seems to be tainted by the obvious fact that
most of the information we need is highly context-dependent. In general, besides
our epistemic limitations in understanding empirical causal chains that might be
relevant, there are at least two general circumstances that prevent a theoretical
understanding in realization-related considerations. First, luck constitutes a deter-
minant factor, whose impact and extent on our practical plans is (perhaps) impos-
sible to estimate. Second, whether a plan succeeds in obtaining the desired result
also depends on how much *effort* is actually devoted by the agents that are trying to
put it into practice. Both these factors are impossible to grasp from any theoretical
perspective, irrespective of whether a theory correctly describes social reality (so
as to minimize the possible impact of luck on the preconditions, see below), and
irrespective of whether a theory is capable of convincing social actors (even if
a theory can be persuasive, how much effort is actually devoted by real agents is
another issue).

Therefore, given the enormous importance of these two factors, and the obviously
large extent to which any story of success depends on specific and contextual
circumstances, we must admit that from a theoretical point of view there cannot
be any general criterion of efficacy determining *ex ante* practical success in socially
relevant issues.[16] However, if the *direct* perspective of finding out general suc-
cessful strategies is not viable, we might consider an *indirect* way to increase
the probabilities of success by focusing on general strategies to prevent common
failures.[17]

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[15] Focusing on efficacy as a capacity, that is on a potential ability to carry out a task or bring about
a change in reality, let us also distinguish the notion of efficacy I employ here, from Hans Kelsen's use
of efficacy. For Kelsen (2007) the 'efficacy' of a norm (or legal order) simply means that it is followed by
the people. This sense of efficacy, being tied to the actual effectiveness of a norm (or a legal order), is a
purely factual sense and may be considered similar to E1.

[16] This is to say that efficacy is not a primary normative concept such as justice. Justice is a contested
concept and even within the same conception it may require different things in different contexts, but
still it is conceptually possible to provide a generally normative definition, that is valid and capable of
being action-guiding *ex ante* even when justice is defined in very general and abstract terms. Efficacy
as *ex post* success (E1), by contrast, does not provide *ex ante* normative indications, and seems to be
dependent on what happens factually.

[17] A similar argument has been suggested by David Wiens (2012a) with regards to feasibility consider-
ations. His approach, however, is far more applied than mine and linked to a constraints-based view
which I try here to overcome.

3.3. A minimal conception of efficacy

As there are insurmountable difficulties in outlining an *ex ante* telling definition of efficacy, I shall pursue an indirect perspective of failure prevention. Call this a minimalist strategy, holding that the first step to increase the probability of achieving the desired result is the prevention of possible failures.

> E2-min: *Efficacy is the capacity to increase the probability of achieving*
> *the desired result by preventing possible failures.*

However, even this definition tells us nothing about what criteria we are to follow in order to prevent a failure, and thus increase the probability of success. In the remainder of the paper I shall try to show that, to respond to this question, we have to plug in criteria drawn from instrumental rationality, requiring the satisfaction of three general conditions: (1) minimization of luck dependency, (2) pursuit of efficiency, and (3) reliability of the plan guiding the actions. If, as seems plain, preventing failures is an indirect way to increase the probability of obtaining success, the investigation of E2-min through the lens of these rational criteria will also shed light on E2, for the criteria to prevent practical failures may also tell us something about the conditions for success.

I shall try to clarify the rationale behind these three criteria of efficacy and present my argument through a very simple and minimal example. Consider the case of a person (or a group of persons) planning to build a house. The action of building a house involves the following three elements:

i. the material, the skills and the land,
ii. human actions, procedures and steps that are necessary to build a house,
iii. the plan or project providing a guide to the human action to put together the materials in a way that is appropriate to construct a house.

These three elements can be generalized in the following three dimensions included in most other complex intentional actions aiming to change reality and obtain a desired result:

i. the preconditions,
ii. the course of actions necessary to build the house,
iii. a plan or project guiding the actions.[18]

The reason why I provided this example is not to suggest that social change is like building a house.[19] The example is employed here simply to help us map and iden-

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[18] The order of presentation of these three dimensions does not necessarily reflect temporally how the action of construction actually takes place (in particular the plan might come temporarily before the other two elements). Here it is simply a matter of conceptual distinction.

[19] That is to say that I am not proposing a sort of 'social engineering ideal', as that feared by von Hayek and Popper in the Marxist tradition, neither am I proposing a technocratic perspective, seeing social and political action purely as a matter of instrumental rationality and technology. As will become clearer in what follows, my perspective of failure prevention also addresses von Hayek and Popper's worries. Regarding the last part of this objection, certainly politics should not be seen as a domain in which a purely 'technological' rationality is capable of explaining the actions of the agents. On the contrary, as realists from Machiavelli onwards have rightly pointed out, a number of successful social actions

tify the possible dimensions in which failures (or possibly success) in implementing a plan might occur. It might be the case that the necessary material is not available or not appropriate (failure in condition 1); or that the action of implementation is poor, inappropriate or disorganized in such a way that it does not carry out the necessary tasks or runs out of resources (failure in condition 2); or that the plan itself is misconceived and unfit for the realization of the desired goal (failure in condition 3).

Let us try and expand from this minimal example to more socially interesting cases, in order to discover what are the minimal but general circumstances that prevent the realization of a plan pursuing a desired goal.

(i) The realization of every type of plan usually relies on the occurrence of some favourable conditions or non occurrence of unfavourable conditions. In the example of building a house the first feature was that of the material preconditions. Here I formulate this condition in a more general way with the criterion of luck-dependency. The realization of a theory may rely on the availability of a resource (e.g. money or natural resources) or on the occurrence of an historical event (see below), but irrespective of the type of resources or historical event, what is important in this framework aiming to reduce possible failures is the minimization of the possible impact of brute luck. As luck is something by definition out of one's control, to increase the probability of the occurrence of the preconditions, the dependency on luck should be minimized.

(ii) The resources at one's disposal are limited, and by resources I mean the material, economic resources and the effort needed to overcome the constraints preventing the realization of a certain plan or desired goal. Then actions implementing the plan should be carried out in a way that respects the plan and does not waste the resources. Some may argue that luck affects not only the first dimension, but also the other two. This is true, and a further luck-sensitive condition is included in the third dimension, as far as reliability, qua capacity to withstand changes and prevent possible unintended consequences, is concerned (see below 4.3). But luck is not included here for this dimension concerns only the appropriateness of the action in terms of its capacity to connect the preconditions, the resources, the plan and the outcome.

(iii) Even if we succeeded in putting into practice the plan pursuing the desired goal, there is always the risk that the achieved outcome turns out to be unstable or that 'perverse' effects occur, that is the outcome might not endure or it might produce other unintended consequences that are in contrast with the goal pursued by the plan. In the example above, the house may crash down or turn out not to satisfy the goal for which it was built (e.g. the house does not provide shelter,

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look less like rational plans than wagers, and are the result of intuitions, creativity and other sorts of actions that might be better understood as products of a craft, rather than of a technology. But instrumental rationality is the only tool we can rely on if we are to account for an *ex ante* perspective.

because the roof leaks). Therefore, an efficacious plan should guarantee a stable functioning through time and say how possible unintended consequences can be prevented.

Why this threefold distinction? Needless to say, this distinction is not meant to provide a general and universal account of the structure of action, but rather to capture three diverse dimensions in which failure (or possibly success) in carrying out an action may occur. Indeed, in this distinction, three diverse dimensions are appropriately kept separate:
– what comes before the action takes place (i);
– what is actually done while the action is performed (ii);
– the project or plan guiding the action towards the goal and informing what we actually do (iii).
The failure (or possibly success) in these three dimensions touches upon very different virtues or faults, as we will see shortly.

Drawing on this, let us translate these considerations and the example above into requirements for normative theories and social action. Feature 1 includes the social, political, historical, and material preconditions; feature 2 is the action of implementation by a relevant social (individual or collective) actor; feature 3 consists in the implementation plan included in or derived from the normative theory.

On the basis of these very general considerations, which are somewhat platitudes drawn from common experience of individual and collective actions, we might put forward some criteria suggested by practical rationality to minimize the risk of failure, if not increase the possibility of obtaining practical success.

4. THREE CRITERIA OF EFFICACY: LIKELIHOOD, EFFICIENCY, AND RELIABILITY

Before the criteria, it is worth recalling that, like feasibility considerations, the criteria of efficacy may apply to both access and stability, which are the two dimensions of realizability. If in feasibility considerations access and stability are seen *from the point of view of the constraints* posed by the world as it is to the implementation of the desired goal, in the perspective of efficacy access and stability are seen *from the point of view of how* the desired goal may be implemented.

1. *Likelihood of the preconditions.* This criterion applies only to the dimension of accessibility and requires that the preconditions for the implementation of the theory be as little dependent on luck as possible. In other words, there should be a sort of parsimony in assuming favourable conditions.
Slogan: reduce dependence on luck.

2. *Means/ends efficiency.* As resources are limited, *ceteris paribus* we should prefer actions of implementation needing fewer resources than others, or as few resources as possible (where by resources I mean both material resources as natural and financial resources, and human and psychological resources).
Slogan: require few resources (or do not waste them).

3. *Reliability.* The reliability condition concerns the actual capacity of the implementation plan to guarantee a transition from its implementation (access) to a stable functioning (stability). It requires that the proposed institutional setting should be thought capable of ensuring the transition from access to stability (*instrumental reliability*) and that the achievement of a stable order does not cause other unintended negative consequences (*normative reliability*).[20]
Slogan: consider possible unintended consequences.

These criteria are meant to assess the capacity of an implementation strategy to prevent, overcome or withstand the possible sources of failure we have seen in the case of building a house. Thus, they seem to be plausible candidates for ensuring an indirect increase in the probabilities of success. Now let us see in greater detail what these criteria require of normative theories. To show how these three criteria satisfy a general requirement of practical rationality, I shall try to demonstrate how non-complying with their requirements would yield conclusions that are clearly untenable. The following criteria are very general with a view to being compatible with most, if not all, action-guiding normative theories.

1. *Likelihood of the preconditions.* The criterion concerning the parsimony in assuming favourable conditions means that there should be a *minimal set of necessary preconditions* for the realization of a theory, or a *maximum set of disjunctively sufficient preconditions* for its realization. Why should this be so? It should be so because if we assumed multiple necessary, but not sufficient, preconditions for the realization of a theory, we would make the actual occurrence of these preconditions, and the realization of the theory, more unlikely. Assuming this latter situation amounts to 'wishful thinking'.

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[20] A similar concern, although in a far more applied perspective, has recently been expressed by David Wiens (2012a) by saying that there are both architectural problems in institutional design (concerning the correct application of ethical principles) and engineering problems in institutional design: "So the engineer specifies the structural limits within which the architect's design must work. But the engineer doesn't have a *carte blanche* when it comes to devising structural solutions; these are to be consistent with the architect's design aim as far as possible. … Hence, the architect and engineer each set limits on the other's set of possible solutions for achieving their objective. … But if the analogy I've drawn is apt, then progress on the architectural problems is insufficient. To design feasible institutional solutions for unjust conditions, we must make progress on both the architectural and the engineering problems. This is because a structure that effectively embodies a chosen set of values [architectural design] but is incapable of withstanding the pressures to which it is subject ceases to embody the chosen values once it ceases to exist as designed.", p. 48. My proposal, unlike Wiens's, does not engage with addressing proper causal analysis of failures, for it is more generally concerned with the general rules to avoid or minimize the possibility of failures.

There is at least a general objection to this criterion. It might be objected that it is not a matter of how many, but rather of which type of assumptions we are considering. For instance, there might be a theory assuming many necessary preconditions whose occurrence, though, is uncontroversially rather likely, and another theory assuming only one sufficient condition, that is very unlikely.[21] To settle this issue, we would need a convergent agreement on a scientific social theory (or on a set of social theories), that is capable of estimating the likelihood of the occurrence of the assumed preconditions. If there were such an agreement, this first criterion of efficacy should be reformulated as a requirement of phenomenological accuracy of the preconditions with respect to the scientific and social theory. However, the occurrence of such an agreement is hardly likely to be the case, for descriptive social theories are at least as deeply disputed and controversial as normative ones. So, lacking an objective and non-controversial scientific description of the world as it is, we have to assess in another way the expectations and forecasts assumed in the implementation scheme. The problem with this solution is that the likelihood of the occurrence of the preconditions might be underestimated or overestimated depending on the optimism or pessimism of the theorist. Expectations might be based on an overly wrong or deeply misleading account of the world. How can we prevent this problem? Perhaps such a problem is, at least to a certain extent, inevitable, but it can be minimized if the expectations satisfy the two following conditions:

a. the reliability of the expectations should be assessed according to a certain description of the world provided by a plausible scientific theory. What makes a theory plausible and scientific is deeply debated, but here the condition that such a theory satisfy at least general epistemological criteria suffices. The vagueness of this first condition is filtered by the following consideration;

b. the expectations we are considering should concern the occurrence of the preconditions that make the implementation of the theory possible. It should not concern the occurrence of the implementation or the means of implementation themselves. The preconditions should be carefully distinguished from the means of implementation, for the minimization of luck-dependence concerns what is out of the control of the relevant social actors, and comes before the attempt to change reality and implement the normative theory. The means of implementation are, instead, not only a matter of probability but also include the capacity of the agents involved. Take for instance the case of a communist revolution. Condition 1 should not concern the likelihood of the revolution itself, but rather the likelihood of the preconditions of the revolution (e.g. an end-point of capitalism in which the contradiction in the process of accumulation of capital reaches the extreme point and the working class is completely deprived of the means of subsistence).

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[21] A traditional example of this is Plato's theory in the *Republic*, in which the only necessary and sufficient condition is that either the philosophers become kings or the kings philosophers for the realization of the *Kallipolis*. On this see Zuolo 2009.

In the absence of a generally shared set of criteria or description of the social world that establishes how likely the preconditions are to occur, these two joint conditions should minimize the possible distortion of expectations about the occurrence of the preconditions. But finally, even if the assumed preconditions were acceptable according to a reliable descriptive social theory, parsimony in assuming favourable conditions would still matter. *Ceteris paribus*, assuming the necessary joint occurrence of two preconditions, say, A and B, is more unlikely than assuming that either A or B would be sufficient as preconditions for the realization of the theory.

Consider, for instance, a green political theory advocating the end of polluting productions and the switch from an economic system wasting natural resources to a system with no environmental impact. The normative grounding may be either the responsibility towards future generations or the call for recognition of the intrinsic value of the natural ecosystem. Suppose there are two competing green theories advocating similar normative ideals but differing with respect to the means of realization. Both theories hold that the fundamental step for a change of the whole system is that all people become aware of the scarcity of natural resources and the huge impact that humankind has on the ecosystem. The first theory assumes as joint necessary preconditions for people becoming aware of ecological issues that (i) a serious ecological catastrophic event occurs (such as a massive nuclear incident), and that (ii) the global economic system experiences an irreparable shortage of natural resources. Instead, suppose that the second theory assumes that either a catastrophic event or the shortage of natural resources are disjunctively sufficient conditions for people becoming aware of the necessity to change the economic system. Clearly, as either one of the two conditions is more likely to occur than both of them jointly, the second theory fares better with respect to the criterion of parsimony in assuming 'favourable' preconditions for the realization of the theory.

2. *Means/ends efficiency*. The second requirement means that the course of action to implement the planned results should respect a criterion of efficiency in the use of resources. By resources I mean any material (money, natural resources) or psychological factor (motivations, beliefs, human efforts) that is instrumentally capable of being conducive to the attainment of a desired goal. Efficiency, however, shouldn't be considered here as a purely quantitative criterion, requiring that the lowest amount of resources should be employed *tout court*. Rather, the criterion of efficiency should be seen as a way to take into account the obvious but inevitable fact that resources at one's disposal are limited. If luck (for the previous criterion) is something we cannot rely on, resources are what we can rely on, but their being limited should urge political theorists to devise the most appropriate course of action for the realization of social change.

Despite the appearance of a quantity-focused criterion, efficiency should draw our attention to the *type* of actions and implementation plans at stake. Whether

we are talking about financial and natural resources, or the capacity of a charismatic leader to motivate and persuade people, the criterion of efficiency should make us focus on those actions and strategies which mostly fit the situation or appropriately use the dispersed social forces, thus indirectly needing less resources.

Besides the general considerations I put forward above regarding the impossibility of determining *ex ante* criteria of success, it might be useful to remind ourselves that whether a certain action or ability is actually capable of having the desired effect should be determined at a more concrete and specific level. Thus, it might be the case that the effective (thus efficacious according to E1) action is not the most efficient. If we consider some of the most striking cases of effective social action that aimed to change social reality radically (e.g. Gandhi, M.L. King etc.), we can see that these actions do not strike us as particularly efficient. On the contrary, they were characterized by the simple perseverance of the activists and leaders, and by their faith in the power of their beliefs and actions. Thus, the suggestion to be drawn from these examples would be to "try hard!" and forget about the efficiency of the course of action. If so, my proposal of assessing efficacy indirectly by considering the strategies to prevent failures as indirectly conducive to possible success, would risk being misguiding.

To this objection I might respond by recalling previous qualifications and specifying the scope of my proposal. It is true that a fundamental factor of practical success is the actual amount of effort devoted by the social actor who tries to put into practice a certain ideal. Indeed, my account leaves out two factors that in practice determine most important successes: specific circumstances and the amount of effort devoted to the realization. Contexts and efforts are practically very important but they cannot be taken into account from a theoretical perspective.[22] But, when I appeal to the idea of efficiency, I do this because I want to assess efficacy *ex ante*. What is actually efficacious, in the sense of practically effective (E1), depends on practical factors that are extra-theoretical (contexts and efforts). But if we want to assess the possibility of putting something into practice, and we have no reliable experience to compare, we cannot but use the instrumental rationality as a general criterion. Finally, I must specify that here the appeal to efficiency should not be seen in a 'technocratic' way, but rather in a rather loose sense, i.e. as a general attention to the use of resources, whose concrete prescriptions are to be devised in the specific domains.

3. *Reliability.* This third criterion concerns the actual capacity of the implementation plan to guarantee a transition from its implementation (access) to a stable functioning (stability). In what does this criterion differ from usual stability considerations? It does not differ in scope, which is precisely that of stability,

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[22] As said above, a general perspective on luck can only try to minimize its possible impact, but by definition luck is a factor which cannot be controlled.

but it adds two further conditions to those usually included in that of a feasibility analysis of stability: that (i) the passage from access to stability be explained with a view in particular to preventing a failure in this transition (instrumental reliability), and that (ii) the institutional setting explain how the occurrence of perverse effects is prevented (normative reliability).[23]

As to the first condition, take for instance the case of a communist society realized in practice. In the jargon of the communist tradition this might be called the problem of the two stage process. All the communist theories were concerned with problems of access to a new order, either by analyzing the historical process of self-destruction of capitalism or by organizing revolution. Very little attention was paid to the ways of ensuring a stable functioning of the realized communist society once the first stage of implementation (abolition of private property, etc.) had been accomplished. This was due to the fact that for Marx, as well as Gramsci, Marxism was a theory linked to the capitalist structure of society, whose function was that of raising awareness, explaining the causes of exploitation and helping the proletariat to bring about the revolution. But in a society without classes and contradictions, the Marxist theory would have had no place. Therefore, traditional Marxist theorists couldn't theorize the transition from revolution (accessibility) to the classless society (stability), thus failing to meet this criterion.

This means that a theory aiming to take the problem of both access and stability seriously should try to explain this transition, in particular if it is assumed that the implementation of the theory would create a "new order" and a new set of social rules. By this I do not mean that only evolutionary theories of social change meet the criterion of instrumental reliability, but only that, when a radical change is being proposed, the theory should explain how the transition is possible and likely to succeed.

The second element of this criterion is closely linked to the first and concerns normative stability. Indeed, instrumental and normative reliability may be seen as two sides of the same coin. With a view to preventing failures, a theory of an implementation scheme should explain how possible perverse outcomes might be prevented.

A possible objection to my argument could be that the criterion of reliability might seem too indeterminate. This might be true if we see it under the perspective of conduciveness to the desired goal. But it might be less indeterminate and more telling if seen through the lens of failure prevention. To

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[23] To these two criteria, it might be added that the institutional scheme be stable as either constant, when perturbations do not affect the relevant properties of the system, or resilient, when the system is capable of recovering its relevant properties after the occurrence of perturbations. See Hansson and Helgesson 2003 for these two senses of stability. However, the discussion of these two further specifications would need a far more detailed analysis which cannot be provided here.

appreciate this, consider Rawls's discussion of property-owning democracy. Rawls says that property-owning democracy is to be preferred over a system of welfare-state capitalism, for the former seems to be more equipped than the latter to prevent (i) the transmission of wealth from one generation to another, and (ii) the formation of persistent powerful and rich elites. Rawls says this for the property-owning democracy is designed to redistribute *ex ante*, rather than *ex post*, the resources, and to avoid a great concentration of wealth and power in a few hands, thus promoting and securing the ideals of equality of opportunity and fairness. Besides considerations of normative preferability, a further possible interpretation of Rawls's choice of property-owning democracy could be that he is precisely trying to devise an institutional setting meant to avoid certain drawbacks and unintended consequences, although, we might add, this is just an *indirect* way of pursuing the desired overall goal.[24] If this interpretation is plausible, when arguing in favour of property-owning democracy, Rawls is also concerned with issues of efficacy, and in particular of normative reliability. Indeed, one of the reasons backing his refusal of welfare state capitalism is precisely its apparent incapacity to secure equality of opportunity and fairness, because of the fact that welfare state capitalism allows for the creation and maintenance of great accumulations of power and wealth in a few hands. Property-owning democracy, instead, is thought to be capable of preventing this problem through an *ex ante* distribution of wealth (via, among other things, a system of taxation of inheritance and gifts, and other measures meant to allow for a dispersion of capital), so that all persons and generations have more equal starting points.

Linked to this issue, some words on the relation between efficacy (*via* reliability) and compliance are in order. Consider a society implementing the ideal proposed by a theory of justice in which rules are followed and institutions complied with by the citizens, whether for right or wrong reasons. Suppose that rule-following in such a society is not an end in itself, but is thought to be conducive to the desired principle of justice (e.g. justice as equality of opportunity). Even in such a society the normative goal may be not achieved. This may be so because of unforeseen circumstances preventing the realization of the goal, or because the plan itself was unfit to achieve the goal, even if all the

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[24] "When a regime works in accordance with its ideal institutional description, which of the five regimes satisfy the two principles of justice? By the ideal institutional description of a regime I mean the description of how it works when it is working well, that is, in accordance with its public aims and principles of design. Here we assume that if a regime does not aim at certain political values, and has no arrangements intended to provide for them, then those values will not be realized. But while a regime may include institutions explicitly designed to realize certain values, it still may fail to do so. Its basic structure may generate social interests that make it work very differently than its ideal description. For example, we can describe a basic structure professedly designed to realize fair equality of opportunity, but the social interests it generates may make that realization impossible. A regime's ideal description abstracts from its political sociology, that is, from an account of the political, economic, and social elements that determine its effectiveness in achieving its public aims. However, it seems safe to assume that if a regime does not try to realize certain political values, it will not in fact do so" (Rawls 2001, 137). In general on Rawls's account of property-owning democracy see O'Neill 2012.

citizens comply with the rules and principles.[25] As seen above, solving this latter problem might be impossible except for easy cases (given the non viability of E1), but it might be easier to prevent some foreseeable failures. Compliance is usually assumed to be a fundamental component of the realization of a just society, but securing compliance by the citizens is a problem dependent on the availability of motivations for the citizens to follow the prescriptions of an institutional order, whereas efficacy is a matter of designing an appropriate (in an instrumental sense) institutional scheme. This latter issue may include but is not reducible to the problem of compliance.

To conclude this section, in general, the order of the three criteria does not reflect any priority of one of them over the others. My aim here was only that of showing the credibility of these three criteria thanks to their being general and minimal. A number of other more specific rules and features can be added to a complete account of realizability. I cannot provide here a justification of the reason why this list should be considered a complete one. I rather aim at showing its credibility by pointing at its non controversial appeal (nobody would deny that a realization plan should be probable, efficient and reliable) and generality, so as to be applicable to a number of contexts and different normative theories.

5. CONCLUSION

The attractiveness and tenability of the idea of efficacy applied to normative political theories seems to be subject to at least the three following objections. The first concerns the philosophical nature of the three criteria of efficacy, the second their applicability, and the third their demandingness.[26]

First, some might say that efficacy considerations are so structurally linked with and dependent on contexts, institutional settings, social conditions or historical paths, that it is impossible to provide a proper theoretical account of efficacy. Therefore, the critique argues, efficacy cannot be considered a proper object of philosophical theorizing, and should be addressed only by scholars of applied social sciences, if not advisors or policy makers. In sum, why should efficacy con-

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[25] For instance, this might be the case in an hypothetical socialist state in which its citizens enthusiastically follow the state's prescriptions, but still the ideal of a prosperous and free classless society is not realized, because, say, a state-administered economy is structurally incapable of generating a sufficient surplus to make people live beyond the condition of mere subsistence.

[26] There is at least a fourth set of critiques, which I shall only briefly mention here. One might criticize the three criteria of efficacy for being too vague and for failing to specify specific action-guiding considerations. In a similar vein one might say that I try to make sense of efficacy by shifting the explanatory burden on to the three criteria, which are, however, far from being clear and self-understandable. To this critique I might reply by saying that the three criteria are certainly and admittedly rather indeterminate on the practical side, so as to provide a theoretical look at this issue. How each of the three criteria is to be understood depends on the specific domains of applications and on the normative ideal to be brought about. Thus, for instance, efficiency might seem at first glance rather indeterminate, but acquire much more sense and prescriptive capacity when applied in a specific domain.

cern political philosophers? To respond to this worry we should get back to the beginning of the paper. If we admit, as seems plain, that one of the reasons why we consider normative theories important is that in many cases we expect them to be able to guide collective actions. Thus, in order to meet the "ought-implies-can" requirement, normative theories should be in some way realizable in practice. Against this backdrop, I tried to show how the issue of realizability can be unpacked into feasibility and efficacy considerations. Therefore, it follows that if the issue of realizability should clearly concern political philosophers (at least those committed to providing action-guiding theories), feasibility and efficacy considerations, in which realizability consists, should also concern political philosophers. As I tried to show, to be genuinely philosophical, though, the type of interest raised by issues of efficacy should be very general, and free of a number of other details that usually constitute the content of issues of efficacy in other domains. Although it is true that efficacy is usually addressed by other disciplines (e.g. marketing studies, pharmacology, psychology, and so on), a philosophical, albeit minimal, account may be provided, to the extent that it is possible to outline generally valid considerations, as I have tried to do in this paper. Furthermore, efficacy considerations may also concern political philosophers in another respect. Many theorists, in particular within the liberal camp, assume that the implementation of the requirements of a certain theory should not violate a set of core fundamental values (e.g. human rights). However, such possible violation may not be apparent until the implementation is actually put into practice. But before running the risk of putting into practice a theory whose practical implications possibly violate fundamental values, it might be more fruitful to devise in theory how and in which specific ways the requirements of a certain theory may be implemented. And this is what the perspective of efficacy should make possible.

A related sub-objection may argue that, even if we admit that efficacy is an admissible object for political philosophy, it should be taken into account only by a very non-ideal theory (cf. Farrelly 2007). That might be the case, but not necessarily, depending on one's account of the relation between ideal and non-ideal theory. Indeed, the purpose of the criteria I put forward above is not that of advocating a shift from ideal to non-ideal theorizing, although a non-ideal theory might start from them to devise an appropriate strategy of realization of an ideal theory. Neither is my purpose that of proposing a reformulation of the role and nature of philosophical theorizing, in a way that also includes very specific strategies and empirical details. Rather, with the idea of efficacy I want to shed light on the issue of realizability of the implementation strategy of a normative theory from a general point of view, be it part of an ideal or non-ideal theory.

The second type of objection questions the applicability of the criteria of efficacy. Most current theories, in particular within the liberal camp, do not seem to satisfy the criteria of efficacy. If so, the critique would argue, it seems that efficacy, if understood as a hermeneutic tool, is useless and non applicable, for very few theories would be enlightened or accounted for by this concept.

As to this latter objection, a qualification is in order. I do not claim that all normative political theories should satisfy the three criteria of efficacy. Recall my starting assumption. My thesis is a conditional one: if a theory is meant to be action-guiding, it should take into account what realizability demands. The whole investigation into the issue of realizability involves both considerations on its feasibility (hard and soft), as well as issues concerning how it might be put into practice (efficacy). By contrast, if the purpose of a certain theory is that of proposing only evaluative criteria or that of pure conceptual analysis, rather than that of providing action-guiding considerations, the implementation strategy of that theory shouldn't be required to meet the criteria of efficacy, for that theory would probably have no implementation strategy.

Instead, as far as action-guiding theories are concerned, the degree of applicability of the criteria I laid down depends on the type of theory. That is to say, philosophical considerations of efficacy might be rather minimal and do not require devising a detailed and complicated strategy of practical implementation. There might be a theory whose strategy of implementation relies only on the assumption that it is capable of convincing rationally and motivating individuals, without needing institutional support or initiatives taken by collective agents. If so, the theory's capacity to motivate individuals would have a heavy burden of proof, in that it should demonstrate that it is sufficient to respond to the challenge of realizability, but it might still be acceptable to the extent that it responds to the efficacy criteria. In other words, this minimal theory of realizability may also be assessed with the proposed three criteria of efficacy. Thus, the capacity to convince individuals of that specific theory should be assessed with regard to whether it can initially motivate individuals to follow the theory assuming the least favourable conditions (first criterion), with regard to how the limited amount of psychological resources of individuals is made use of (second criterion), and how such motivation may endure in a stable manner without causing other unintended consequences (third criterion).

As to the third critique, the requirement of efficacy I've placed on theories might seem too demanding for current normative political theories, for few of them seem to satisfy all three of them. The considerations countering the previous critique also apply in part to this objection. But it is worth better qualifying the scope of application of the criteria of efficacy. They are not to be seen as an 'all-or-nothing' set of strict *desiderata*, requiring that in the theory be outlined specific actions, concrete conditions, and detailed strategies; they should rather be seen as a set of criteria to serve two main purposes. The first one is that of working as 'filters', that is as criteria to exclude types of implementation strategies that are not compatible with the conditions above. The advantage of having the three criteria included in the idea of efficacy is that of excluding implementation strategies that are clearly too dependent on good luck, non-efficient, or likely to produce practical and normative perverse effects. It wouldn't worry me if such a conclusion seems obvious, for the aim of this paper was precisely that of formulating simple

and general criteria of practical rationality applied to the realization of normative political theories, in a way that has not so far been made explicit.

The second purpose is that of providing a way to assess comparatively competing ways of implementation of the same type of ideals.[27] Here the function and result of the application of the three criteria might be less obvious and generate more interesting conclusions.

To conclude, a final qualification and a consideration of the relation between desirability and efficacy. My insistence on the issue of realizability, and in particular on the dimension of efficacy, does not mean that the issue of realizability is more important than that of the desirability of the proposed social ideal.[28] The criteria forming the efficacy condition, as it is the case for the feasibility condition, are meant to be applied in order to assess a theory's realizability once we agree on its desirability and on the need to put it into practice. Efficacy serves the purposes and completes the action-guidingness of the normative considerations.

As said, a useful application of the three criteria of efficacy could be that of assessing comparatively diverse strategies of implementation of the same normative theory. A more complicated issue would be that in which we were to assess the preferability between a social ideal A, which is normatively preferable to B, but less realizable (because of efficacy or feasibility considerations). Should we prefer A or B? What is to be the all things considered most important criterion? How should we weigh efficacy with respect to moral desirability? That is a very complicated question, also touching upon other issues such as the general conception of normativity, or the role of ideals in social actions. I cannot respond to all these questions here. However, first, it might simply be said that considerations of efficacy or feasibility should not trump normative considerations. But we might say that if in a certain situation A is preferable *prima facie* to B, and B is not enormously less preferable than A, and B is much more likely to be implemented than A, it might be the case that an all things considered perspective should suggest that we opt for B rather than A. But, this does not mean that B becomes normatively preferable to A.

Finally, my investigation into the concepts of realizability, feasibility, and efficacy aims to provide both realist and idealistic camps with a conceptual framework to assess this issue, independent both of the methodology employed and the ideal pursued. For this reason an investigation of the issue of efficacy should be considered as an interesting conceptual issue in its own right.

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[27] This function might be used as a pragmatic appendix to the broader (and more normatively focused) comparative assessment urged by Sen (2006).

[28] In general on the interplay between desirability and feasibility see Pasquali 2012.

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