An Incrementalist Approach to Political Philosophy. The Case of Heterogeneous Rationality Assumptions in Theories of Distributive Justice

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The main goal of this thesis is to provide a framework for the pursuit of normative inquiries in the field of political philosophy, which bridges ideal and non-ideal theory by accommodating both types of approaches and by providing a blueprint for the transition from ideal and non-ideal theory. This blueprint is subsequently used to examine the various ways in which principles of distributive justice are dependent upon certain idealised assumptions and the ways in which such principles would be affected by the transition from ideal to non-ideal theory. A secondary goal of the thesis is to explore to what extent we can draw on various developments from social sciences (and particularly for this thesis, from neoclassical and behavioural economics) to engage in meaningful analyses of theories belonging to the field of political philosophy (and particularly for this thesis, theories of distributive justice). Aside from the provision of a theoretical background concerning the topic of distributive justice (chapter 2), the thesis consists of two main parts. In the first part, I reconstruct the ideal/non-ideal theory distinction in a two-dimensional account and I outline and defend normative incrementalism (chapter 3) as a methodological approach to political philosophy. In the second part (chapters 4-7) I seek to illustrate how the normative incrementalist framework can be put to use, by uncovering a number of problems which may appear in the transition from ideal to non-ideal theory, proceeding by incrementally weakening rationality assumptions in various theories of distributive justice. Thus, I first use Rawls's (1971) theory of justice as fairness to show that by introducing heterogeneity in the rationality conceptions held by individuals in the original position, a strong case can be made for the selection of threshold prioritarianism (Brown: 2005) over the principles of justice as fairness. This result illustrates the more general claim that, in some cases, incrementally modifying the inputs of a normative model may lead to a change in the principles generated by that model. Secondly, I use a number of both welfare and resourcist sufficientarian theories to show that in cases which simultaneously involve maximizing and satisficing agents (understood in the sense proposed by Slote: 1984), sufficiency views which adopt a welfarist subjective-threshold, a welfarist objective-threshold committed to the headcount claim or a resourcist threshold respond in a morally objectionable manner. This result illustrates the more general claim that, in some cases, incrementally modifying the inputs of a normative model may lead to a decrease (or, alternatively, increase) in the desirability of that model. Thirdly, I use Dworkin's (1981b)
resource egalitarian theory to show that in cases which allow space for the idea that individuals can make reasoning errors, the principle of equality in the opportunity to insure is stricken by a different strand of unfeasibility than the one recognized by himself, thereby subverting the force of this principle even in highly abstract cases such as the shipwreck survivors scenario. This result illustrates the more general claim that, in some cases, incrementally modifying the inputs of a normative model may lead to a decrease (or, alternatively, increase) in the feasibility of that model. Fourthly, I show that Otsuka's (2015) objection against Parfitian prioritarianism, according to which this view is implausible since in one-person cases involving other-regarding decision-making under risk, fails if we allow a plurality of individual attitudes towards risk. This result illustrates the more general claim that, in some cases critiques of normative models are themselves reliant on a specific combination of inputs and that they may be refuted under different, and more empirically plausible, assumptions.