

# Mission Indispensable: The Point of Political Philosophy<sup>1</sup>

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## 0. Introduction

One important line of questioning for philosophers is to ask what the point of certain principles, concepts, values or practices is. This line of questioning helps us to work out whether something of putative importance is fundamentally important or only important insofar as it serves some other requirement. This, in turn, helps us to do a number of other important tasks, including evaluating the validity of the tasks we pursue and the effectiveness of our approach to it. When we know what the point of something is we better understand how and whether to approach it. Just as fishing for fun and fishing for a living may require different approaches, if the point of an ideal like equality is to preserve a certain kind of social relationship, and not some pattern of distribution, then we have reasons to reconsider the things we do in the name of equality, what policies an appeal to equality can support and whether we really care about equality or something else.<sup>2</sup> In this paper I explore, rather than challenge, the point of political philosophy and I show how this affects how political philosophers ought to approach, what I take to be, their central pre-occupation: defending and objecting to certain principles.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In section 1, I argue that the *point of political philosophy*, or at least one important point, is to work out the most plausible account of the demands of justice. Such an account will contain all and only those principles that are most plausible, and plausibility is determined, primarily and fundamentally, by the guidance those principles would give us in hypothetical and real world cases. To put things another way, we ought to be concerned with sorting those principles that are indispensable if we are to have the most plausible account of guidance from those principles that are dispensable.<sup>3</sup> Indispensable principles may include non-ideal principles. This turns on whether non-ideal principles can be derived entirely from indispensable ideal principles, which is a further question.<sup>4</sup>

In section 2, I identify the conditions under which a principle is indispensable in order to clarify what we should be looking for in principles. I show that indispensable

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<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to Brian Carey, Stephanie Rinaldi, and Chris Mills for conversations about and comments on this paper. I am also very grateful to Jon Quong for a conversation on this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Anderson, E. 1999. What's The Point of Equality? *Ethics*. Also see P. Tomlin, "What is the Point of Egalitarian Social Relationships." and J. Quong "What is the Point of Public Reason" both on file with their respective authors.

<sup>3</sup> It might be objected that we can work out all the correct answers without having indispensable principles. We could, in theory, have all of the correct answers without even thinking much about it, by outrageous luck and without thinking about plausibility. However, I believe that this is so improbable as to make it worthy of dismissing the possibility for the sake of argument and I believe that reflection and defence of principles gives us something we cannot get from guessing or appealing to *ad hoc* feelings in each case, which is justified confidence. It is only when we go through the process of identifying indispensable principles that we can have any justified confidence in our having the correct judgements even if we can, by luck, get the right answers without these principles.

<sup>4</sup> See A. John Simons. 2010. Ideal and Non-Ideal Theory. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* for a defence of the view that non-ideal demands of justice can be derived wholly from those ideal demands.

principles are more plausible than their rivals and in order to be more plausible than their rivals they must offer distinctive guidance. Moreover, indispensable principles are also non-instrumental. We can always do without instrumental principles, since they may change and we can derive them from fundamental principles when we need them.

In section 3, I assess the way that we approach one of the main tasks carried out by political philosophers, namely, defending and objecting to certain principles using reflective equilibrium. I introduce the category of 'relatively dispensable principles', where indispensable principles are contained within the most plausible account of justice, as those that collectively give us the most plausible guidance, and 'relatively dispensable' principles are those that have little role in our thought about practical debates. With the addition of this category we can say that, given that the point of political philosophy is to work out the most plausible account of justice, when defending and objecting to principles we should be trying to do one of the two following sub-tasks. Firstly, one can show a principle either to be or not be indispensable. The best defence of a principle will show that it is indispensable. The best objection is to show it is dispensable. Secondly, one can show a principle to be or not be trivial. A good defence of a principle is to show that it has a more extensive role in our thought about practical debates, for which we most need principles, and thus is relatively pertinent. A good objection, even to an indispensable principle, is that it plays little or no role in our thought about practical debates and is thus relatively trivial. This ought to inform our approach to political philosophy and provides a basis from which to judge the validity of what we take ourselves to be doing and the effectiveness of our way of doing it.

## **1. What is the Point of Political Philosophy?**

Why do political philosophy at all? The main reason is that we want to understand what justice demands, which is just to say we want the most plausible account of the demands of justice so that we can, ultimately, work out what *should* happen, in both the ideal and the non-ideal world.<sup>5</sup> No one would say that it didn't matter whether their view was plausible or not. Arguments in political philosophy are about such plausibility often explicitly, but sometimes implicitly as I will discuss.

As political philosophers, then, we should indirectly be concerned with the sources of plausibility, which confer plausibility of some set of demands over another. As I will argue, plausibility has a more than one source. We can show this by considering why principles are more plausible than *ad hoc* judgements. There are some particular cases about which we have strong and clear considered convictions of justice, such as slavery, and these tend to be situated in simplified or imaginary cases.<sup>6</sup> There are other judgements

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<sup>5</sup> While working out the principles of justice may not be end of the matter for working out what should happen, for example, we may need non-normative facts, we cannot working out what justice demands without the best account of what justice demands.

<sup>6</sup> There may be suitable limits of good or useful intuitions and cases. I need not claim that there are not such limits. My argument depends only on the claim that there are some valid intuitions and that coherence with this primarily

about which we lack confidence, usually hard cases, and these tend to be complex or concrete real-world cases. Without committing ourselves to the view that morality must be structured by principles, perhaps in order to be intelligible to us, we can defend principles by saying that principles enable us to lend the support and confidence that we have in our considered convictions to those cases about which we have less confidence. If a principle can explain all of our considered convictions then we should have more confidence about its applying in those cases about which we lack a settled view. Thus, the principles that can explain these convictions give us grounds to be confident and this makes principles more plausible than not appealing to principles.<sup>7</sup> Generality of the rules is one key source of plausibility such that a more general rule, *ceteris paribus*, is more plausible than a less general rule.

The need to have general rules comes from the importance of avoiding describing our own intuitions and the importance of generating new guidance for hard cases. However, general rules are not desired unless they can also explain some of our considered convictions. A general rule that that was subject to counter-intuitive counter-examples would not be very plausible. This brings me to another source of plausibility that I think is the one that we should be on the look at for as political philosophers. This source is the ability of the guidance to explain our considered convictions about particular cases and to avoid counter-examples.

In this paper I will focus primarily on the plausibility of the guidance given by principles as the main source of overall plausibility. I take it that the plausibility of the guidance offered by a principle is the most important source of plausibility such that a set of principles that provides more plausible (i.e. more intuitive and less counter-intuitive implications in a range of relevant hypothetical and real cases) guidance is always more plausible than another set of principles that provide less plausible guidance, but might fare better with respect to some other source of plausibility, such as generality or plausibility of the motivation for morality e.g. a social contract or society of equals. I do not disregard these other sources of plausibility entirely. Rather, plausibility of guidance is the most important source of plausibility if the rules or principles we use are sufficiently general. Beyond sufficient generality, plausibility is almost entirely affected by plausibility of guidance. We have reasons to reject a single general principle and accept a more complicated theory of principles if the more complicated theory gives us more plausible guidance. For example, if it avoids certain counter-examples or explains certain considered convictions that the more general theory cannot. Thus, if a theory offers less plausible guidance than an alternative theory we usually have decisive reason to reject it.

However, to support this claim it is worth considering some rules that seem to be plausible independent of or in spite of their recommendations. I will show that the plausibility of these rules is derived primarily from the plausibility of the guidance they give,

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determined the plausibility of a principle. Having said that, I do believe that the suitable limits will be themselves specified by second order intuitions i.e. intuitions about what makes certain intuitions valid.

<sup>7</sup> I have not given an argument that for the proposition that we should have confidence in those judgements, but I do not know what else could possibly be the source of confidence other than our strongest moral convictions.

such that whether we should accept or reject them as an account of the demands of justice depends on whether they give the most plausible guidance.

Often we find ourselves following certain rules derived from some general idea(l) when deriving principles. Moreover, these rules do not seem to be linked to the plausibility of the guidance given. For example, consider contractualism, versions of which are concerned with deriving principles from individuals' actual or idealised agreements.<sup>8</sup> It might seem that contractualists hold that the plausibility of some guidance is not a reason to favour some principles of justice over other principles of justice. Contractualists might be understood as claiming that the only or one important criterion we should use to decide between principles is whether they would be accepted by individuals, however implausible the guidance these principles provide. Certainly those committed to certain procedural or democratic principles as fundamental demands of justice seem to be committed to this thought.<sup>9</sup> But it is a mistake to regard their search for principles of justice that are acceptable to all (reasonable or actual people), as a project that gives us an exclusionary reason to bracket considerations of the plausibility of the guidance principles provide.<sup>10</sup>

This is not the most charitable way of understanding their search because we never have reasons to ignore the plausibility of the guidance given. Relative implausibility of guidance always provides a reason to reject a principle, though whether such guidance is implausible may depend on our intuitions about how much being democratically chosen can excuse. To show a principle has deeply counter-intuitive implications is as close a thing we have to a knockdown argument. To be sure, some will not share our intuitions, but beyond plausibility we have little claim to the acceptability of our principle. This claim can be supported by considering the fact that all contractualists or political liberals would reject their theory if the guidance it offered in the easy hypothetical simplified cases clashed with their considered convictions of justice more than alternative views.

It may be said that the idea of morality as a contract provides us with a satisfying account of *what* is wrong in cases of obvious wrongness, namely that people act or institutions are designed unjustly when the principles that they follow could not reasonably be accepted or could reasonably be rejected. However, this explanation of *what* is unjust can only be a good account if it can yield plausible guidance or, in other words, identify *that* slavery etc. is wrong. Only when principles identify everything *that* is unjust does the attractiveness of an explanation of *what* is unjust become an important factor in determining relative plausibility and therefore indispensability. The only way to decide between views that claim to offer a more satisfying account of why it is wrong is that they judge more cases that are intuitively wrong correctly than the alternatives. Thus, plausibility of guidance is king.

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<sup>8</sup> For examples of the kind of view I am calling contractualism see J. Rawls *Political Liberalism* Columbia University Press, T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other*, Belknap Press.

<sup>9</sup> For a recent discussion of the role procedures could play in an account of justice see E. Ceva. 2012. "Beyond legitimacy. Can proceduralism say anything relevant about justice?" *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*

<sup>10</sup> Raz, Joseph, *Practical Reason and Norms*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.

Additionally, deciding whether to take actual agreements or some of the many possible agreements that idealised citizens would make is a decision that is made not on the basis of the best understanding of what a citizen is or is or is supposed to be, at least not primarily. Primarily we should accept a specification of deliberators and a deliberative situation that will result in plausible guidance. To paraphrase Rawls, when talking about his own idealised position of agreement, if the resulting guidance given by the principles that result from an intuitively plausible procedure for the derivation of such principles is very implausible, even repugnant, then we reject the procedure.<sup>11</sup>

A better way of understanding contractualist or proceduralist views and their relation to plausibility is to understand them as making a claim about a rule that is plausible. It is plausible to think that principles of justice should be the subject of some kind of idealised or actual agreement, but if the resulting principles sanction obviously unjust outcomes and guidance, such as slavery or even less egregious outcomes, the principles are to be rejected on grounds of implausibility of guidance. Whether we should accept some version of contractualism depends primarily on the judgements it makes and the guidance it gives. Disagreements between contractualist and their rivals are not disagreements about the nature of moral argument or about the individual as sovereign, or at least if they are, they are at a more fundamental level disagreements about the plausibility of the guidance derived from following such rules. Certainly, if contractualism always led to implausible guidance we ought to reject it, no matter what its other attractions were. Whether we should accept contractualism or some other view depends primarily on which view provides the most plausible guidance.

We do well to note Jerry Gaus' important contributions to political philosophy as he may seem to evade the criticisms I have made of contractualists. Gaus claims to be engaged in a task that Rawls called 'moral theory'. The expressed aim of this task is not to identify plausible guidance or to specify the demands of justice but rather to determine the terms of association between us as we are building on our understandings as free and equal people. How, Gaus asks, can we justify moral authority over others when we disagree about what should happen but are nevertheless respected as free and equal interpreters of morality's requirements? Gaus' work explores the possible grounds for the moral authority of some set of terms to live by and builds it up from common understandings of ourselves. However, whether we ought to accept what Gaus says as the best account of what grounds moral authority, and the terms that follow, does not depend on whether it truly *can* be accepted by idealised or real people, or whether such a common understanding *is* present in our society. Whether we should accept Gaus' principles depends, primarily, upon whether they give a plausible account of the terms on which we should live together and this, in turn, depends on whether such terms, if followed, would lead to implausible or plausible, intuitive or counter-intuitive circumstances.<sup>12</sup> If we ought to accept what Gaus claims we must be convinced that other attempts to ground moral authority are less plausible but this

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<sup>11</sup> J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition 1999, Belknap Harvard, pp. 18-19.

<sup>12</sup> J. Gaus 'Constitution' available < <http://www.gaus.biz/>> and *The Order of Public Reason*, Cambridge University Press.

judgement will be based on the plausibility of their guidance. Thus, plausibility, and particularly plausibility of guidance, is king. Whether we should accept Gaus' view turns on whether it offers plausible guidance and not on whether his conclusions truly follow from the account of moral authority he gives.

As political philosophers we should be arguing, at least primarily, about plausibility and this means arguing about plausibility of guidance.<sup>13</sup> In light of this purpose we can reconsider the way we do political philosophy, typically by objecting to and defending certain principles. We can say that the best or most convincing defence of some principle of justice will show that principle to be part of the most plausible account of the demands of justice. In other words, this principle will be *indispensable* if we are to have the most plausible guidance. The only other sorts of principles are *dispensable* if we are to have the most plausible guidance. Dispensable principles are those we can do without and still get the most plausible guidance. Dispensable principles do not serve our genuine goal as political philosophers and as such we have no interest in chasing dispensable principles for their own sake. Moreover, within the set of indispensable principles we should be more concerned with those that have a more extensive role within that most plausible theory. In the next section I will answer the question of what makes a principle indispensable to clarify how our arguments for or against the indispensability of some principle can proceed more specifically.

## 2. What Is An Indispensable Principle of Justice?

The ultimate task for political philosophers is to work out what principles give the most plausible guidance and therefore they should be concerned with those principles that are indispensable if we are to have that guidance. Since we care about the guidance we should care about those principles we need for that guidance and care less about those that are unnecessary. The way that we defend and object to principles should be informed by this aim and our interest in indispensable principles.

In order to accomplish our task we must work out what indispensable principles are and what properties they have. A principle of justice is indispensable only when we cannot do without it in the most plausible account of justice. As such, to be indispensable, any principle of distributive justice, must offer more plausible guidance than its rivals. Clearly, if proposed principles are less plausible than their rivals we would not want to, never mind need to, refer to them in the most plausible account of justice. Thus, our focus should be on *relative plausibility* not *absolute plausibility*.

Indispensable principles must also be non-instrumentally weighty. Principles are dispensable if they are *only* important as a means to meeting the demands of other

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<sup>13</sup> One might say that the truth is what we should be arguing about, but insofar as the truth is not linked to plausibility I say it doesn't matter. If showing a view is not plausible is not the same as giving good reasons for thinking it untrue then we do not want that kind of truth. Instead we should strive for guidance, possibly at the expense of that sort of truth. In any case, however, my view does not deny that we should be doing that. I simply deny that that is the main thing that political philosophers should be doing.

principles. For example, assuming that the principle of utility was indispensable, if a principle of equality of resources, as a demand of justice, is instrumental because based on the assumption of diminishing marginal utility, then the principle of equality of resources is dispensable but the principle of utility is not. The principle of utility is all we need. We do better, in terms of guidance, without the principle of equality so long as we have the principle of utility. This is because, if diminishing marginal utility did not hold in all conceivable or real cases, as I suspect it doesn't, following an equality principle will give us the wrong guidance and the utility principle the right guidance. When we need it, though, we can derive the equality principle from the utility principles. This is the problem with instrumental principles; they change and won't always give us the most plausible guidance.<sup>14</sup> The same cannot be said about fundamental principles. Since the guidance of instrumentally weighty principles, when it is most plausible, can be obtained without reference to instrumental principles, and since where it diverges it gives us the wrong guidance, those principles cannot be indispensable.

Indispensable principles need not, however, be fundamentally weighty. Non-instrumental principles can have an indispensable role. For example, we may have a fundamental reason to establish, say, a society of equals and meeting a threshold of basic needs might be a permanent part. In this case the basic needs principle would not itself be fundamental, but this principle gives us guidance that could not be omitted from a complete and sound theory of justice as a society of equals. A conceptual link to a fundamental principle yields a non-instrumental principle and these principles will be required for the most plausible guidance. This is because non-instrumental principles are constantly plausible guidance givers, unlike instrumental principles.

Thus, indispensable principles are non-instrumental and offer more plausible guidance than their rivals. This raises two further questions, "What are a principle's rivals?" and "What makes a principle more plausible than some rivals?" I shall now address each question in turn.

## **2.1 What Are a Principle's Rivals?**

A principle's rivals are those accounts of justice that do not include that principle. Thus, principle P's rivals are theories of justice that do not include principle P. To establish that a principle is more plausible than these rivals one cannot merely establish that this principle is more plausible than some other principle in isolation. For example, Rawls' difference principle, which, as commonly understood, requires that inequalities in the distribution of certain resources are justified only if they are to the greatest benefit of the least

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<sup>14</sup> We might contrast instrumental principles with conditional principles. Instrumental principles are parasitic on fundamental principles in getting us the correct guidance. Thus, the instrumental principles are not reliable in all imaginable cases. However, conditional principles may be fundamental principles. It can always be true that in circumstance X we should do P or P should happen. It is a further question as to whether all conditional principles must be instrumental, though it might be suggested that they are because the conditional application must be explained by a more fundamental principle.

advantaged, cannot be shown to be dispensable just because it is compatible with certain kinds of objectionable class inequalities, about which we have strong considered convictions, with which more stringent egalitarian principles are not compatible.<sup>15</sup> The difference principle can be, and is usually discussed, as part of a theory, justice as fairness, which gives priority to fair equality of opportunity, which is supposed to rule out those inequalities. Thus, one does not show that a principle is dispensable by showing that principle, in isolation, offers less plausible guidance than some other principle, in isolation, since that principle, when combined with other principles may be part of the most plausible account of the demands of justice and thus indispensable. Moreover, one does not show that principle P is indispensable in the most plausible account of justice by showing that a theory including P is more plausible than a theory that does not include P since there may be other theories that do not include P that are more plausible overall.

To establish that P is indispensable one must establish that a theory including P is more plausible than any theory that omits P. This may sound like a cumbersome task involving an extensive survey of all advocated and imaginary positions. Carrying out this cumbersome task is, of course, one way of making a very important contribution to political philosophy, but most of us only hope to make a small contribution to this ultimate aim by taking shortcuts, giving qualified conclusions, or by making *baby steps*, and I will say more about what the *baby steps* are in section 3. But before that, we can note that one shortcut, which enables us to avoid extensive surveys, is to use *a fortiori* arguments. If a theory containing P is more plausible than the best theory that does not contain P, then P is indispensable. This seems to be the task embarked upon by Henry Sidgwick and Derek Parfit in taking on common sense morality and by John Rawls in taking on Utilitarianism.<sup>16</sup> Returning to our previous example, showing that the difference principle is compatible with class inequalities does go at least some way to show that it is dispensable insofar as it is part of a particular sort of more comprehensive argument, which claims that Rawls' prior principles cannot also condemn such inequalities. But showing some principle has some implausible implication is not worth showing for its own sake. Thus, a principle's rivals are all those theories that do not include it.

## 2.2 What Makes a Principle More Plausible Than Its Rivals?

For a principle to offer more plausible guidance than its rivals it must offer distinctive guidance. This is because plausibility of principles is primarily derived from the guidance it gives, in easy or hard cases, in imaginary or real examples and distinct, better or worse, plausibility can only be achieved through distinctive guidance.

It is worth considering a thought that runs contrary to this conviction. If two principles offer the same guidance in all conceivable cases then neither is indispensable,

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<sup>15</sup> Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 53-54.

<sup>16</sup> H. Sidgwick 1874 *Methods of Ethics*, London: Macmillan; D. Parfit, 1984, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Rawls *A Theory of Justice*.



though we can only do without one and which one is not a decision we can make based on their plausibility. This might lead us to think that some indistinct principles will be indispensable. However, I doubt that any genuinely distinct principles offer the same guidance in all conceivable cases.<sup>17</sup> What makes two principles two and not one is that they offer at least some distinctive guidance in hypothetical or real cases. There's no relevant difference between principles that give us identical guidance in all conceivable situations.

We can now re-phrase the task of defending or objecting to some principle as a demand of justice, then, as examining whether that principle is non-instrumental, distinctive and more plausible than the most plausible rival views. To do so we can proceed in two stages. Firstly, we should identify what is distinctive about the principles and theories. Secondly, we should be concerned to test the plausibility of such principles where distinctive by appealing to intuitions in hypothetical and perhaps real cases. These might be described as *baby steps* and if we are carrying out these sorts of tasks then our task is valid and we should keep in mind the ultimate task when doing so.

### **3. What does this mean for the way we do political philosophy?**

Two main types of task are widely undertaken by political philosophers in the search for the most plausible account of the demands of justice. These are 1) defending some principle(s) and 2) objecting to some principle(s). In this section I want to draw out the implications of this point of political philosophy for those tasks by drawing on what I have said in the previous sections. I will consider how the search for those principles that are indispensable if we want the most plausible guidance, those that are distinctive, non-instrumental and more plausible than their rivals, should inform our approach to the design of thought experiments and our approach to defending and objecting to principles in argument.

#### **3.1 What does this mean for thought experiments?**

Since indispensable principles are those that are relatively more plausible than their rivals our use of intuitions and the design of thought experiments should be comparative. To remain true to the point of political philosophy we should not really be concerned with the absolute merit or absolute plausibility of principles, in itself. What should interest us is not that one view is plausible, very plausible or implausible. That it can account for many or few of our considered convictions of justice. To prove only those things about a principle is not to genuinely condemn or praise a principle, though it may be a baby step towards genuine praise or condemnation. A search for indispensable principles leads us to look for principles that offer more plausible guidance than their rivals, since it is only when principles offer more plausible guidance than their rivals that they can be indispensable in a complete and sound theory of justice. To tell apart two principles that offer largely the same guidance in some practical cases we have to devise a practical or hypothetical case in which to test their

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<sup>17</sup> I am also confident that these conceivable case with not allude the imagination of political philosophers.

plausibility. We have to look for cases in which the views come apart. We should accept the view that offers the most plausible guidance where the views come apart.

The point of political philosophy should sway our use of the widely accepted methodology: reflective equilibrium.<sup>18</sup> The intuitions and convictions we should call upon to pass judgement on the plausibility of the principles should be taken from only those cases where the principles we are defending or objecting to are distinct from their rivals.

### 3.2 What does this mean for argumentation?

Often political philosophers are concerned with defending a principle or objecting to it. We can understand this as an attempt to show that a principle is plausible or implausible, or more plausible than has been thought by some, or less plausible than has been thought by some. We can now give these two tasks a much sharper focus, having reflected on the point of political philosophy.

In objecting to a principle we should be trying to show that it is dispensable and not merely that it cannot account for this or that conviction or intuition. In defending a principle we should be trying to show that it is indispensable and not merely that it can avoid an objection or that it can account for some convictions. This involves identifying a principle and a set of rivals and showing that where distinctive the principle is or is not more plausible than those rivals. However, there are two further tasks we can carry out even if we agree that some principle is indispensable and these tasks contribute to our ultimate task of getting the most plausible account of the demands of justice.

Within the category of *indispensable* principles it is also worth considering the *relative indispensability* of these principles, that is, how much we need the guidance offered by these principles in particular practical debates. The “relatively”, in “relatively indispensable”, here refers to “relative to other indispensable principles” within the most plausible account of the demands of justice and not to “relative to its rivals” as it does with *indispensability*.

The relative indispensability of some principle will likely change, depending on what the relevant practical debates actually are, but it will be somewhat fixed, i.e. restricted to some range, depending on the place it has and its weight relative to other demands of justice. Thus, a principle of justice that is lexically inferior to a principle of utility could never have a very significant role in any practical debates, assuming that very few practical cases involve options with exactly equal utility. It might have more or less of a significant role. Its guidance can be more or less important for what we are currently thinking about, i.e. which practical debates, depending on what we are currently thinking about and whether the lexically prior principle makes any difference to the plausibility of the theory or principle. Such a principle may make no difference either because sated or otherwise equally satisfied, in those types of cases. If some principle is not weighty then it would be a trivial, lightweight

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<sup>18</sup> J. Rawls, ‘Outline for A Decision Procedure in Ethics’, 1951,60:1, *Philosophical Review* T. M. Scanlon, ‘Rawls on Justification’ in S. Freeman (ed.) *Cambridge Companion to Rawls*.

principle that does not make a significant difference in almost all situations for which we require guidance.<sup>19</sup> While it might be more plausible than guidance offered by rivals, and theories of justice which include this principle rather than another will offer more plausible guidance overall, a lightweight principle is mostly dispensable in many of the debates we are most concerned with and thus is not relatively indispensable. Since we care about principles insofar as they are most plausible and they are most plausible insofar as they give us the most plausible guidance, a valid critique of a principle, then, is that it *almost* never matters in the debates in question.

What we should be focussing on, in our research and in our argumentation, is defending principles as *indispensable* and also *relatively indispensable* and objecting to principles as either *dispensable* or, if not, then *relatively dispensable*. This not only explains one of our most important collective purposes, and allows us to organise our work towards a common goal, but it also allows us to clarify, more specifically, what sorts of tasks we ought to be carrying out to help to achieve that goal, that is, what sorts of *baby steps* we should be taking.

The best objections to principles will establish that they are *absolutely dispensable*. One can show that a principle is absolutely dispensable if one shows that it is less plausible than its rivals where distinctive. One can show this either by considering intuitive cases where the views are distinctive or one can show that the principle is instrumental. Instrumental principles are always dispensable.

Another good objection to a principle will show that it is *relatively dispensable*. This sort of objection will accept that the principle is required for a complete and sound theory of justice but will show that it plays a pretty insignificant role in our thought about practical debates, such as principles that are lexically inferior to the principle of utility. One can show that a principle is *relatively dispensable* by showing that the principle is trivial or light-weight relative to other demands and principles. Or one can show this by considering a particular debate, or by defining a set of debates as the most interesting or important, and showing that the other principles that matter are going to leave almost no space for this principle to give guidance.. One advantage of the strategy is that you do not need to take on a very great burden of proving that the principle is thoroughly dispensable. This, as was noted, could become a cumbersome task because it requires consideration of all principles that do not make reference to that principle. One might use this strategy to argue against the principle of equal opportunity in education. To do so one need only claim that other things, such as the value of the family or certain kinds of freedom are always more important where they clash.<sup>20</sup> Since they always or usually clash in debates about education, and these are important practical debates for which we require guidance, the principle of equal opportunity, while sound and more plausible than its rivals, is not more important than

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<sup>19</sup> This is what critics have said about high upper-limit sufficientarianism. For a discussion of this criticism see. P. Casal 2007, "Enough is not Enough", *Ethics* and L. Shields 2012, "The Prospects for Sufficientarianism", *Utilitas*.

<sup>20</sup> For an argument that intends to show the opposite, that where the value of the family and fair equality of opportunity do not clash in many of the most important settings for educational policy see H. Brighouse and A. Swift, 2008, "Legitimate Parental Partiality", *Philosophy & Public Affairs*.

other indispensable, and in these cases counter-veiling, principles. A fairly well-known example of this strategy in a different context is the arguments given by critics of ideal theory, who claim that the most relevant or urgent set of debates for political philosophers are those that occur in non-ideal circumstances and since much of political philosophy is addressed at ideal theory and is invalid in non-ideal circumstances, they suppose, though some ideal principles are indispensable they are relatively dispensable in that they play no role in the relevant debates.<sup>21</sup>

Likewise a principle can be defended either as being *indispensable*, by showing it to be weighty, non-instrumental and more plausible than its rivals where distinctive, or as being *relatively indispensable*, by showing it to be *indispensable* and having a fairly central role within a theory of justice and in some relevant practical debate. One defends a principle as indispensable by showing that where distinctive, accounts that include it are more plausible than any accounts that do not include it. One defends a principle as relatively indispensable by showing that in some important practical cases this principle plays a very important role, either because it is the first thing that matters or because it matters more than things that clash in those practical cases.

#### 4. Conclusion

In clarifying the point of political philosophy I have sought to inform the current practice of defending and objecting to principles by appeal to the main point of doing work in political philosophy, to identify the most plausible account of the demands of justice. I have argued that a, or the, point of political philosophy is to secure the most plausible account of justice, which itself is determined by which principles have offer the most plausible guidance. Thus, in what we do we should aim for progress towards the identification of those principles of justice that we cannot do without, if we are to have the most plausible judgements and guidance. There are two ways of doing this. Firstly, we can show some principle to be distinctive, non-instrumental and more plausible than its rivals. Secondly, we can show some that principle lacks one of these properties. This is how we ought to approach defending and objecting to principles of justice. There are two further tasks that are also pertinent to our ambition of identifying the most plausible guidance. We can show that a principle has a significant role in our thought about practical debates or we can show that a principle has no role, or a relatively insignificant role, in our thought about practical debates.

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<sup>21</sup> C.Farrelly 2007 "Justice in Ideal Theory: A Refutation" *Political Studies* and A. Sen 2009 *The Idea of Justice*, Allen Lane.