An Internal Problem for Ideal Theory
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Abstract. The prevailing methodological view among normative political philosophers can be crudely summarized by the mantra "ideal theory precedes nonideal theory". This "ideal guidance view" has been recently charged with several deficiencies: that ideal theory is too blind to important real world tradeoffs to guide us in nonideal circumstances (Farrelly 2007); that ideal theory is neither necessary nor sufficient to make comparative moral evaluations among feasible states of affairs (Sen 2009); that ideal theoretic abstractions neglect prominent forms of injustice, like racial and gender injustice (Mills 2005); that ideal theory's neglect of social science leads to ineffective prescriptions (Wiens 2012, 2013, forthcoming). These are "external" problems for ideal theory—they threaten inferences from ideal theory to nonideal theory. In this paper, I raise an "internal" problem for ideal theory, one that arises within the practice of doing ideal theory, whatever we might say about its relation to nonideal theory. I start by proposing that normative political theories share a general structure, using Rawls's and Nozick's theories of distributive justice to illustrate the proposal. Consideration of this structure suggests that the content of normative principles is *constraint-relative*. That is, the content of normative principles is sensitive to the theorist's assumptions about the world—for example, the prospects for collective action, the degree of resource scarcity, the motivations of political leaders, and so on. This claim is borne out by further examination of Rawls's and Nozick's theories. This constraint-relativity raises the question of constraint selection within the practice of ideal theory. I proffer some desiderata to guide constraint selection. Following consideration of several answers to the question of constraint selection, I argue that the class of constraints that best satisfies the proffered desiderata is the class of "failure analytic constraints", i.e., constraints derived from analyzing the social failures we observe in the actual world. It turns out, then, that the best way to specify the content of normative political principles bypasses ideal theory altogether.