

Realism and Idealism in Democratic Theory

Incompatible Action Guidance

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Abstract

The actual political world may impose tradeoffs among our values. In particular, it may force us to choose between deepening certain preconditions of democracy (e.g. security, stability, social peace) and pursuing more developed values thought to be conceptually connected to democracy (e.g. equality, inclusion, freedom). Democratic theories that acknowledge these tradeoffs make different classifications and give different action guidance than those which do not. In other words, what counts as a democracy and what we need to do to make our democracy more democratic will differ depending on the perspective we take on tradeoffs among values. We therefore face a forced choice between these perspectives in the design and reform of actual political institutions. This choice is unfortunate, because neither perspective appears to be a wholly accurate description of the real world.

Introduction

Claim - Realist and idealist justifications of democracy disagree about what kinds of regimes count as democracies, because they rely on different assumptions about the extent to which the actual political world imposes tradeoffs among our values. This disagreement results in conflicting guidance about how to improve democratic institutions.

Realists tend to focus on “basic values” like security, stability and social peace, whereas idealists tend to assume that these values are already achieved and focus their guidance on achieving other, more developed values like equality and inclusion. The two groups also disagree about whether some basic value or background condition (e.g. social peace) can be taken for granted in the actual political world. Realists are reluctant to assume the achievement of the basic values because they think that the steps required to achieve them will likely impose limits on the full achievement of the developed values. By contrast, idealist accounts assume that certain basic values can be achieved without foreclosing the possibility of full or near-full achievement of more developed values.

Assumptions about Tradeoffs

To begin, notice that the conflict in action guidance emerges from assumptions regarding the conceptual relationships among values. Realists appear not to take for granted certain values that idealists do appear to take for granted, such as social peace, avoiding state capture, etc. Idealists make their arguments *given* those things; they’re trying to solve problems of anti-hierarchy, equality and so on, and they assume that at least to some extent, the basic values have been achieved.

Not all accounts of democracy purport to be action-guiding. Idealistic accounts in particular are sometimes simply attempts to work out what we mean when we invoke some particular value. In these cases, the conflict of action guidance does not arise. However, other idealistic accounts both take basic values for granted and make specific recommendations for how to improve existing democracies. They agree with realists in taking the basic values to be necessary preconditions of democracy, but unlike realists they assume either that these values have been substantially achieved or that their achievement will not impair other, more developed values.

Realists respond that we ought not to assume the achievement of the basic values, because they are in some sense things to be achieved in our world. If their achievement is both a necessary condition of democracy and a practical limit to some of the more developed values that democracy promotes, then we are in the paradoxical position of striving for something we cannot fully achieve. So if we simply assume achievement of the basic values, we assume away the compromises of higher values required to achieve them. Realists think that full achievement of the basic values would impair the higher values, in the sense of limiting their full realization. By contrast, idealist accounts point to either no relationship or (occasionally) a positive relationship between the basic and higher values, situating them as mutually reinforcing.

A Value Possibility Frontier

To see the problem of action guidance more clearly, consider Figure 1. Let x be some precondition for democracy (social peace, stability), and let y be one of democracy’s developed or constitutive values (equality, inclusion). Let

x^* and y^* indicate the ideal fulfilment of each of these values, and let \underline{x}^* indicate a close approximation of ideal fulfilment achievable in the real world. Let \underline{x}^r indicate some threshold level of that value. Let the solid red and blue functions indicate the set of Pareto-efficient combinations of (x, y) for idealists (red) and realists (blue). Point I indicates the maximization of both x and y given real-world conditions, and set $R = \{R^y \dots R^x\}$ indicates the set of Pareto-optimal points where $x > \underline{x}^r$ and $y > \underline{y}^r$.

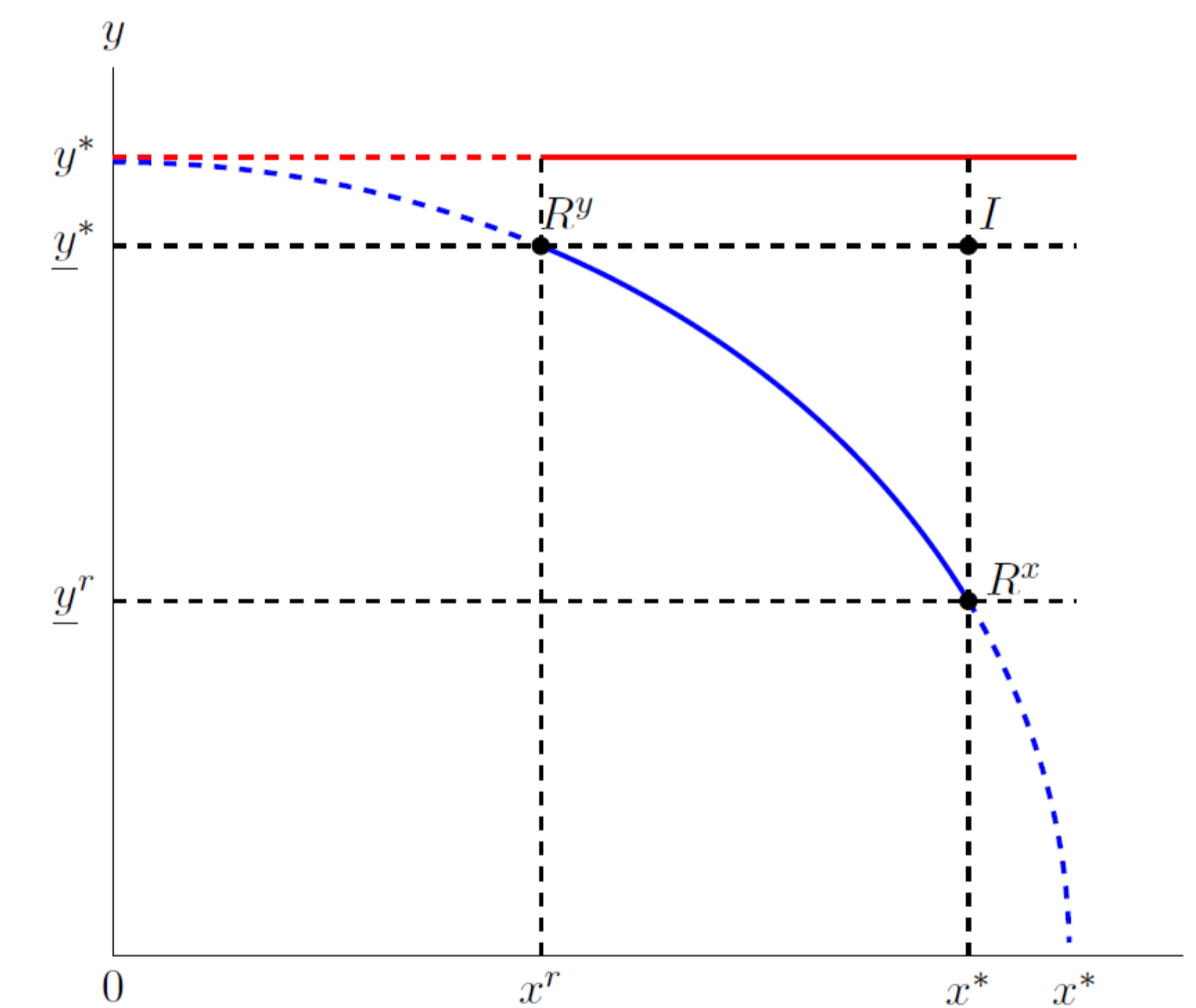


Figure 1: Incompatible action guidance resulting from incongruent assumptions about the costs of fully achieving basic democratic values.

Notice that the idealists’ ideal point I is beyond the possibility frontier given by realist assumptions. Realists would view the high level of some developed value (given by y) as contingent on some cost to a more basic value (given by x). While realists would agree that high levels of these values are achievable, the costs of doing so, on realist assumptions, are indicated by the lower position of R^x and R^y with respect to the other value. These extreme positions would be reached only in cases of lexical priority.

Incompatible Action Guidance

If it is clear that motivational realism and motivational idealism present us with conflicting action guidance in the reform of our democratic institutions, it is just as clear that to embrace one position to the exclusion of the other would

deprive us of something valuable. The realist insight that democracy has certain preconditions is well-supported in the empirical literature, as is their assertion that (as a practical matter) these preconditions are in some kind of tension with our democratic aspirations. However, the idealist insight that under certain circumstances large measures of the aspirational values can be achieved without substantial costs to the prerequisite values is itself supported by empirical research (e.g. Bowles and Gintis 2011).

The distinction between these two positions emerges from the motivational complexity of human behavior, particularly our status as “conditional cooperators” (Gächter 2006:2-3). Attempts to model this motivational complexity have so far been somewhat crude, employing fixed assumptions about the extent to which values can be harmonized or reconciled. However, the history of actual democratic societies is characterized by rapid changes in how the tradeoffs among values are understood. While it may indeed be true that we have a strong tendency to pursue self-interested ends at the expense of the common good, it is no less true that in certain contexts this “logic of consequences” can be replaced or supplemented by a “logic of appropriateness” in which certain prosocial roles or identities are activated, eliciting some socially-constructed “appropriate” behavior (March and Olsen 1998, but see Goldmann 2005). It is clear that institutional arrangements can both elicit and frustrate this behavioral shift.

Conclusions

Our views on tradeoffs of value have profound consequences for our democratic theory. If we take the realists seriously, we run the risk of constructing institutions that are unnecessarily coercive and assume a type of fixed behavior that is in fact malleable. If we take the idealists seriously, we run the risk of undermining the prerequisites that buttress an imperfect but useful democratic order and, in effect, “sawing off the branch we are sitting on” (Orwell 1940). If our democratic theory is to take account of actual human behavior, it must also be attentive to the ways in which actual human behavior can be changed, both by institutional context and by changes in our understanding of the interaction of values. Both of these perspectives contribute something valuable to democratic theory, but we lack a mechanism for integrating their insights.