

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Sense and sensibility or: remarks on the ‘bounds of (non)sense’

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Abstract

Kratochwil’s diagnostic approach identifies specific failures in particular, historical contexts in order to prescribe practically realisable remedies under non-ideal conditions. The diagnostic approach compares actual alternatives against each other rather than against some ideal. Yet, the basis for such an identification is unclear. By reinterpreting Kratochwil’s approach with the help of Buddha’s Four Noble Truths, one can understand Kratochwil’s existential worldview and his aims, but the medium Kratochwil uses hinders the attainment of those goals. He tries to communicate in writing something (*phronesis*) that belongs in the world of experience.

Keywords: Diagnostics; pragmatism; ideal theory; experience; *phronesis*; politics

There are numerous ways of being wrong, Kratochwil tells us in his *Status of Law in World Society or Meditations*.¹ In its last meditation, in a ‘reflective judgement’, Kratochwil interrogates traditional strategies for knowledge generation, finds them wanting, and outlines his own alternative: diagnostics.

Kratochwil criticises the usual division of labour between a theorist and a practitioner, where the former is tasked with the clarification of foundational principles and the latter with the application of those principles to ‘real world problems’. Such a division results, he argues, in ‘two pathologies for the price of one’.² The theorist may elaborate ideal principles, which are allegedly at best loosely derived from the actual problems they are supposed to solve, but such ideal principles are poor guides to action.³ The practitioner’s knowledge of what ‘works’ may be based on certain techniques and practices, but ‘ready-made “solutions” are again in search of problems’. In both cases, Kratochwil argues, ‘the “answer” drives out any concern of what the question was’.⁴ This leads him to argue that practitioners

¹Kratochwil 2014, 283.

²Ibid., 265.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 289.

are quite similar to ideal theorists in their mindsets.⁵ Kratochwil calls for a different mindset.⁶

Dr Kratochwil or: how I learned to stop worrying and love diagnostics

Instead of ideal theory or an unreflective focus on practices, Kratochwil espouses diagnostics that supposedly avoids the pathologies of ideal theorists and ‘a-theoretical’ practitioners. Diagnostics begins with the premise that reason cannot provide a theory of judgement with which to apply universal principles, derived from ideal theory, but it does not deny the usefulness of ideals or values.⁷ Rather than deriving ideal goals from values, which are used to assess some actual order, a diagnostic approach identifies specific *failures* in a historical real-world context. This identification should lead to a prescription of a particular remedy, which need not aspire to universal applicability, but which needs to be realisable under actual, non-ideal conditions.⁸ Put differently, we can be satisfied with the second best, because the ideal is unreachable; ideal solutions may work on paper but usually not in practice. Or, in any case, ideals always need interpretation and application in a specific context anyway, and to pretend otherwise pushes the bounds of sense, argues Kratochwil. For him, an unreachable ideal is worse than a reasonable, possible, partial solution for the time being. The latter are not ideal, and they do not solve all of our problems, but they are good enough if they work and attract at least the indifference of others, if not their acceptance.

Kratochwil’s focus on the ‘good enough’ solutions begs the question ‘as compared to what?’⁹ Here, the comparison might be to the ideal or to other good enough solutions. As to the former, Kratochwil argues that the ideal is unrealisable in practice and a poor guide to action. Even if some ideal could be identified, it could be realised in multiple, equally valid ways. Therefore, there are multiple ‘best’ solutions, and a fundamental problem remains: no logical proof can be conclusive.

If comparing to other good enough solutions, there are, also, many of those. While some may be better than others, some of them may be equally good, although there are probably different trade-offs between equally good solutions. Analysing these trade-offs helps one to decide on a course of action, and by understanding that one’s initial position is imperfect prepares one for the (inevitable) need to make future adjustments in light of the identified trade-offs.

In turn, this serves as an important ‘reality check’: the efforts of many ideal theories to solve an issue by isolating it from others is far removed from our experience in living in a social world where fully isolating one issue from others is difficult. We do not live in some ideal, imagined, timeless world but in interconnected and temporal *worlds*, in which we are reminded of our (and others’) limitations on a regular basis. But we nevertheless must act in various ways despite those limitations.

Because we are embedded in social relations and our solutions and their trade-offs impact others, or entail acting together in some form or another, *politics as the*

⁵See, though, Bueger 2021; Sikkink 2021; Welsh 2021; Westerwinter 2021.

⁶Elaborated more fully in Kratochwil 2018, 2021.

⁷Kratochwil 2014, 285.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., 286.

art of the possible takes centre stage. The possible is limited for instance by the need to have political agreement among multiple interested or affected parties, by our (and their) other limitations and other projects, and by the fallibility of our (and their) knowledge at any given time. Instead of focusing on the ‘Truth’ or the ideally best, Kratochwil calls attention to the need to nevertheless act within a historical and a practical *social* context and to focus thereby also on such issues as responsibility as an element of action.¹⁰

In sum, Kratochwilian diagnostics leaves behind ideals and the pursuit of a perfect design. It focuses on identified or perceived problems and disappointments in the social world. We should be more like good casuists: identify and diagnose an actual problem, and why it is a problem, within particular, historical circumstances; don’t start by imagining some ideal world and work backwards from there.¹¹ Kratochwil wants us to start in the midst of things and other people, with the possible and the realisable, in order to see what is ‘the best we *can* do’ given our limitations and the need to accommodate or work with others, who also have their own ideas, values, limitations, and projects.¹² Politics as the art of the possible is needed in order to settle on one solution over the others. Partially, this political process aims to achieve at least a temporarily binding decision in the absence of some algorithm to whose conclusions all ‘must’ agree.

Kratochwil’s *sutta*

Kratochwil’s punchline is: focus on acting (well) in the *worlds* (plural) you live in rather than on trying to discover the World (singular) from some Archimedean point. There are plenty of actual problems in need of solutions, and we have limited capabilities, resources, and time in addition to having other individual and collective projects. Do the best you can, Kratochwil seems to say. This alleviates perhaps some anxiety.

Yet, other anxieties emerge. This meditation requires one to unlearn much of what has been drilled into our western way of thinking for the past centuries. Here, some of Siddhārtha Gautama’s teachings seem more relevant than those following from the western Enlightenment.

Kratochwil is no Buddhist, but there are similarities between this meditation and the Four Noble Truths.¹³ Kratochwil would disagree with claims that he has an innocent view of the social world in the sense that it is allegedly void of conflict.¹⁴ Instead, he would agree with the First Noble Truth: life is suffering (or pain), and this is an ineradicable condition of being part of the social world. Moreover, given the overall message of his meditation, Kratochwil should also agree with the Second Noble Truth: we perpetuate some of that suffering with our perceived need for some ideal theory that could solve our problems once and for all. Therefore, he

¹⁰Ibid. On responsibility in this context, see e.g. Peltonen 2013 and Sikkink 2021.

¹¹See especially Kratochwil’s treatment of Rawls throughout this meditation; Jonsen and Toulmin 1989; see also Kurowska 2021.

¹²Although not present in this meditation, an analogy to the medical practice would have been suitable. I thank Nicholas Onuf for ensuring that I mention this somewhere.

¹³Buddha 1993.

¹⁴E.g. Sinclair 2010.

should also agree with the Third Noble Truth: the suffering may cease (at least partially), when we let go of the *perceived* importance of having some ideal theory. Finally, the way to let go is to follow a different path: one of moderation regarding the importance and usefulness of theory, of ultimate values, and of experience. While the last three Noble Truths are important, none transcends the First Noble Truth. And so, with regards to peace and justice, like any other aspect of the social world, they must be cared for by diagnosing first the suffering and by then acting moderately, ‘not by fantasies of perfect health or omnipotence that changes the human condition by the stroke of a pen or the thump of a gavel’.¹⁵

Hello, stranger!

Kratochwil counters objections to his diagnostics swiftly. The first objection concerns the criticism that his approach understands the existing as the reasonable, and that thereby diagnostics is uninterested in emancipation or change and only interested in feasibility. Second, diagnostics does not provide a roadmap, because it does not specify a goal to strive for. Third, a focus on local conditions misunderstands morality and its purpose in providing universally valid standards. All three objections appear valid from the perspective of ideal theory, but they are less convincing without the presumption that we *must* have some ideal theory, or values which all can share, or otherwise we cannot act. Moreover, these three criticisms have their own weaknesses: the perceived need to have some supreme values leads to paradoxes and undecidable debates (or even to open conflict); ideal theories do not provide roadmaps either; and morality does not require that assessments are made on the basis of alleged universal values and among *all* possibly imaginable claims – even if it does require an impartial assessment of *affected* interests.¹⁶

Yet, in his ‘internal dialogue’, Kratochwil avoids certain important questions that might imply a return of ideals and thereby that we meet ideal theory again, some sunny day.¹⁷

First, the diagnostic approach identifies specific failures, but it is unclear how to identify a ‘failure’. Do we not need a prior idea of what would count as a ‘success’ in order to be able to judge something as a ‘failure’, or at least as ‘not success’?¹⁸ Second, failures are to be analysed in their actual contexts, but there are no ‘contexts’ ready to be analysed. Kratochwil has spent much of his academic career in explaining this! Contexts are constructed and constituted through *our* assessments, assertions, and judgements. Third, one is to compare the trade-offs of various realisable alternatives to a given, actual problem. Here, some criteria are needed, but whence they originate, or how to decide over competing, alternative, equally valid sets of criteria remains unclear. Thus, if diagnostics begins by identifying a failure in its actual context, it is unclear how to first identify the failure *as a failure*, how to identify what *the actual context* is, and how to *select among alternative ways* of addressing it.

¹⁵Kratochwil 2014, 291.

¹⁶Ibid., 286–87.

¹⁷See also Onuf 2021; Peltonen and Traisbach 2021.

¹⁸Note the importance of hope (of success, or at least ‘not failure’) in this context. See Vilaça 2021.

Kratochwil's answer to this critique might relate to his general approach to (social) science and particularly to his ontological stance.¹⁹ He might say that we need to interpret the context and understand that whatever criteria we use, they are historical, not a-historical, local, not universal, probably contingent. The criteria themselves are contextual. Fine, but the second criticism still holds. Alternatively, one might move to the meta-level, but that would only move the criticism by one level without answering it. Thus, because some criteria are needed, and such criteria must come from somewhere *even if they are contingent and contextual*, a reader is left with the impression that some form of ideals and thereby ideal theory are needed also in diagnostics. Settling on 'what works' or 'is possible' might not help, because even such an assessment requires some criteria. Somehow, on the basis of something, we need to make our assessments, judgements, and assertions, but these issues remain unclear in Kratochwil's diagnostics.

Kratochwil might point towards his overall argument about the centrality of politics. There is a need for a political process exactly because there are multiple, possibly acceptable sets of criteria or possibilities, and in a given case, we need to settle on one set at least in that case and at this time. Neither perfect theories nor laws, or thumps of a gavel, can settle this problem once and for all and ensure that one need not return to it in the future.²⁰ Exactly because we need some criteria, but they cannot be determined beforehand for all possible cases and futures, politics is needed. Politics is needed in constituting particular circumstances as *this kind* of a context within which further politics takes place in constituting a failure to be diagnosed. Politics is then needed to settle on some set of criteria and on a process to determine what to do about it. Afterwards, politics is needed to actually do it.

Does this not sound like saying that to understand politics one needs to understand politics? If so, why take ideal theory so seriously, allegedly being about finding the universal solution? Why not see it as just another part of the political process? Moreover, is this not what diagnostics is too? Is the diagnostic approach not also a 'best' way, albeit that it does not claim universal, ahistorical solutions beyond the diagnostic approach *per se*?

Put differently, Kratochwil says that "non-ideal" ... reflection on problems of praxis *does not deny* the importance of "ideals" or values, but proposes a different way of realising them'.²¹ But a sympathetic co-mediator is puzzled. If one is told that we should focus on the 'second best', not the 'ideally best', because the second best is the best we can hope for in practice, then is the second best not practically the ideal? To quote Kratochwil's own saying: just because you can imagine a Pegasus does not mean that you are likely to encounter one in nature. Similarly, just because people are able to imagine some ideal world, do we not always act within the bounds of what is practically possible? Why take ideal theory so seriously, at its own word?

These questions arise from Kratochwil's desire to communicate through a written text something that belongs in the world of action, experience, and

¹⁹See e.g. Kratochwil 2007a; 2007b.

²⁰But they can create, manage, evaluate, and adjudicate expectations of the ongoing and ensuing political processes. Kratochwil 2014, 284.

²¹*Ibid.*, 285 (original emphasis).

phenomenology. Diagnose, not (ideal) theorise and test, he says, but an academic book, no matter what its style, is not the greatest medium for conveying *phronesis*.²² For that – ‘ideally’, hah! – we should have actual practice, deeds, and experiences (and failures and learning that we have ‘failed’) in various practical situations, just like medical students learn through clinical clerkship, rounds, and rotation. One can learn from the experiences of others, and certainly those experiences might have been written down; it is a good practice. Yet, even though someone else may have written down their experiences, reading them is *my* personal experience, and what I learn and how and when to apply it is not determined by the text. Like in learning to practice medicine, it is vital to learn from texts, but it is important to treat actual patients and to follow through the effects of different treatments in order to learn how and when to apply what. And that one learns through one’s own experiences. One can write a book about how to ride a bicycle, but one learns how to ride it only through actual experience and trial and error.

Kratochwil wants to teach *phronesis* by having us read his book, but here lies his biggest challenge. Through an internal monologue with (imagined) interlocutors, by going ‘back and forth’ between facts and norms, by using analogies, metaphors, and counterfactuals, Kratochwil tries to ‘woo’ us.²³ But this wooing and its medium follow a form taken from the object of his critique. His audience (and he himself) has been trained to think and understand through that same form. What can he do but also himself use the same, currently prevailing, historical, contingent, contextually valid criteria and mindset? Thus, he himself attracts criticisms in that same form, and our mindsets elude change, despite his best efforts. But perhaps remembering Kratochwil’s *sutta* is good enough – for now.

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²²Aristotle 1984; see also Bueger 2021.

²³Kant’s term; Kratochwil 2014, xv; see also Onuf 2021; Peltonen and Traisbach 2021.

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