Journal of Didactics of Philosophy, Vol. 3, 2019, 73-82 DOI: 10.46586/JDPh.2019.9564

ON ASSESSMENT IN TEACHING POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY: DESIRABILITY AND FEASIBILITY

Ján Baňas
Faculty of Arts and Letters, Catholic University in Ružomberok, Slovakia
jan.banas@gmail.com

Received: 5 June 2019
Accepted: 15 July 2019

Abstract

The article offers a tool that can be used for assessment of ideas in political philosophy with students in education processes. The proposed method of assessment is based on the criteria of desirability and feasibility. Employing this method can help the students focus more carefully and point their thinking to two important aspects of normative theories in political philosophy. The article provides an analysis of the two criteria and shows how desirability-feasibility assessment should proceed. By doing that, it proposes a system of combining desirability and feasibility in critical assessment of ideas in political philosophy.

Keywords: political philosophy, assessment criteria, desirability, feasibility

When trying to assess some normative theory (or a part thereof) in political philosophy, (at least) two basic aspects of the conception need to be addressed: its desirability and feasibility[1]. Many authors have in fact employed these criteria when thinking, discussing, and writing about various theories/conceptions/claims in political philosophy. Employment of these two criteria suggests that desirability and feasibility might be very useful tools for and/or important aspects of making assessment in political philosophy. However, despite employing desirability and/or feasibility as assessment criteria in political philosophy, we find only relatively few more systematic attempts to explicitly expound their meaning.[2] I believe these two criteria might be

[1] It might be argued that selecting just these two criteria for assessment in political philosophy is a questionable reduction. On the one hand this objection is correct since these two criteria are clearly not the only criteria one needs in order to make a fully comprehensive assessment in political philosophy. Among other (and prior) aspects of a theory in political philosophy that are to be addressed fall e.g. the consistency of the theory's different claims, the logical validity and soundness of arguments, etc. However, these prior considerations are not specific to political philosophy, but are relevant for all areas of philosophy (and in fact any theory). For this reason, when proposing desirability and feasibility as assessment criteria in political philosophy, I am not dismissing the prior and more fundamental criteria, but assuming that they have been assessed and deemed fulfilled before proceeding to desirability-feasibility assessment. I am thankful to one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing out the need to address this point.

[2] Some authors use the criteria without almost any explication, relying, as it were, only on their intuitive meaning, e.g. Kuna (2010). Others, as for example G.A. Cohen (2009), provide some explicit explanation of their understanding of the criteria (or one of them in Cohen's case). A good systematic account of feasibility can be found e.g. in Gilabert–Lawford-Smith (2012) and Southwood (2018). Other authors that have discussed (at least one of) the criteria (using different understandings/definitions thereof) are for example: Räikkä, J. (1998), Pasquali

helpful not only for political philosophers, but also for teachers of philosophy in the education process when teaching political philosophy. The aim of this article is to propose an analytical explication and an explicit definition of desirability and feasibility that could then be used as tools for assessment in teaching political philosophy. After discussing the individual criteria, the article describes how desirability-feasibility assessment should proceed with the aim to propose a system of combining the criteria in critical assessment of political ideas.

1. Desirability

The analysis of desirability (and later also that of feasibility) will proceed in the following manner: it will start with considerations of the ordinary and/or intuitive meaning of desirability, which will gradually be developed further in order to arrive at an understanding and definition that could be appropriate for employment in the context of assessment in (teaching) political philosophy. This gradual approach has been adopted, since it might also be employed with the students, i.e. to ask them to try to come up with a definition of the criteria themselves – starting with ordinary meaning and then eliciting further specifications until they arrive at a definition that would be appropriate to serve as an assessment criterion.

At the outset of the analysis of desirability, one has to ask what the claim "*x* is desirable" means. This is the level of ordinary/intuitive meaning of desirability. On this level, I suggest to consider general dictionary meanings of desirability. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines desirability as: "desirable (that) | desirable (for sb.) (to do sth.): that you would like to have or do; worth having or doing" (Wehmeier 2000: 315). Collins COBUILD *Advanced Learner's English Dictionary* provides the following definition: "Something that is desirable is worth having or doing because it is useful, necessary, or popular" (Sinclair 2003, 381). Yet another useful definition that could guide our thinking about the ordinary/intuitive meaning of desirability can be found in *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners*: "something that is desirable has qualities that make you want it" (Mayor 2002: 375). The underlying structure of all the above dictionary definitions (ordinary meaning) of desirability all indicate the following definition of desirability (DD):

DD_1: *x* is desirable if it has quality *q* that makes *y* want (to have, to achieve) *x*.

An immediate obvious problem with DD_1 is that it fails to specify some reliable criterion for determining what is truly and/or objectively desirable. DD_1 states that desirability is based on the existence of a *q* that gives rise to a relation *y wants x*. However, it does not reflect the fact that different people might be drawn to want different (possibly even opposing or contradictory) things (based on different qualities). According to DD_1, e.g. democracy might be deemed desirable in virtue of giving every citizen a vote. At the same time, DD_1 enables someone else to consider e.g. racism desirable based on the fact that it deprives a group of people (that he hates) the right to vote. Thus, DD_1 is too subjective and therefore rather

(2012), Keulman–Koós (2014), McGeer – Pettit (2015). For further sources, one can consult the references indicated by these authors.

uninformative, since it allows almost any *x* to be deemed desirable given it possesses a quality that has the ability to initiate a positive response in someone. DD_1 is therefore useless and possibly also highly controversial if we wanted to use desirability as an assessment in (teaching) political philosophy.

Since DD_1 proved to be insufficient, the following specification might help avoid its shortcomings:

DD_2: *x* is desirable if it would help *y* to achieve a desired end *e*.

DD_2 is derived through further analysis of DD_1. As regards DD_1 one may notice that every *x* deemed desirable is such in virtue of the end hoped to be achieved by obtaining *x*. Thus, what is really desired is not only the *x* itself (with the quality *q* that makes us want it), but an end one hopes to achieve by obtaining *x*.[3] Therefore, adopting DD_2 might help avoid the problems of DD_1; namely the lack of a reliable criterion determining what *x* is truly/objectively desirable, as well as the possible confusion caused by the fact that according to DD_1, different opposing, even contradictory things could end up being considered desirable. The criterion for an *x* to be desirable, according to DD_2, is whether obtaining *x* would actually bring *y* to the achievement of a desired *e*.

DD_2 might raise a serious objection that needs to be addressed. The possible objection is that DD_2 understands everything desirable only as "instrumentally desirable", i.e. desirable only because it brings us to some other end. This might seem to be a mistake, since political philosophy clearly includes, analyzes, discusses, and proposes ideas, conceptions, and values that seem to be desirable in themselves without an instrumental value for something else, as e.g. to end wars and achieve peace, to end/decrease world hunger/poverty, to build a just society, etc. All these seem desirable things/goals without any apparent further goal they need to help us achieve. Consider the case of bringing about peace, and for the sake of simplicity, let us understand peace in a rather restricted way as the absence of military conflict. To end war is indeed a desirable thing that does not need an appeal to any further end it is to help achieve. Yet, although one can consider peace as desirable without an appeal to a further end, it does not mean there is no further end that peace is intended to achieve, and/or that this end is irrelevant for the desirability of a particular attempt to achieve peace.

Thus, there are things that can possess:

1) "two-fold desirability" – they are desirable in themselves (e.g. peace), but also due to a further (and higher) end they help to achieve (in the case of peace it is the possibility for fuller human flourishing [peace is a necessary - but not sufficient- condition for full human flourishing]); [4]

[3] In an Aristotelian framework, this is the case except in the case of the final end, or highest good, that we wish for itself and nothing else.

[4] In making this distinction, I am taking inspiration from Aristotle's discussion of the character of the ends people choose in his Nicomachean Ethics.

2) only "instrumental desirability", i.e. they are desirable only as a means to some end (e.g. money).

This distinction between 1) and 2) will be important in the last section of the article in the context of the discussion whether desirability is separate from or dependent upon feasibility. However, despite the fact that it is formulated in terms of an end, DD_2 (and also DD_3) should be understood as expressing "two-fold desirability" not "instrumental desirability".

A further difference between DD_1 and DD_2 can be explained with the following example. Imagine a person, let us call him Jack, is thirsty and wants to ease his thirst. On a table in front of him, there are two glasses filled with the exact same amount of a transparent liquid. Neither of the two liquids has any taste or smell. One of the glasses, glass A, is filled with water; while the other, glass B, is filled with poison so strong, that if Jack puts even a little sip of it in his mouth, it will kill him immediately. According to DD_1, both the glasses are desirable since both include a liquid substance, which is a quality would make a thirsty person want it. However, according to DD_2, only glass A is desirable, because glass B would in fact not bring Jack to the desired end – i.e. easing his thirst, but to a certain death.

However, even DD_2 requires a further specification. For according to DD_2 without further qualification, racism, for example, might still turn out to be desirable – namely in case there is a person whose goal is to make sure black people are e.g. not allowed to vote. Or consider the example with the two glasses of liquid. If Jack wanted to commit suicide, then according to DD_2 glass B would, in fact, be equally desirable for him as would glass A be for a person wishing to ease her thirst. According DD_2, if a person has an informed preference (one wants *x* and truly knows what it is) instead of simple preference (one wants *x* and thinks that it is what one wants, but it might in fact, not be what one wants) she might still desire for something that is objectively undesirable (glass of poison to commit suicide). It is, therefore, obvious that even DD_2 requires further specification. It has to be supplemented with a requirement that the end *e*, which is to be achieved is not just any end, but an end which is a genuinely good/proper end for *y*. Thus, the following further specification of DD_2 can be proposed:

DD_3: *x* is desirable if it would help *y* to achieve *e*, which is genuinely good for *y*.

This definition of desirability addresses all the problems connected with DD_1 and DD_2 mentioned above. This could be easily demonstrated if applied to the problematic outcomes of the above examples where DD_1 and DD_2 failed. However, with adopting DD_3, a complication of a different sort occurs. This definition requires an argument for what might count as *e*, i.e. a *genuinely good end* of *y*. However, for the purposes of this article, a genuinely good end of *y* is understood in the Aristotelian terms of an end that is in accordance with the *telos* of *y*, which is defined by the dispositional properties of the *y*'s nature.[5]

[5] This understanding of a genuinely good end requires an extensive argument that would need much more space than this article allows for. Thus, I ask the reader to take the argument for granted for the sake of the argument here.

Now, this teleological understanding of the genuinely good/proper end of *y* assumed to stand behind DD_3 might, unsurprisingly, raise another very relevant objection. If DD_3 presupposes a teleological understanding of what can count as a genuinely good/proper end of *y*, is the desirability criterion thus understood applicable to all different types of theories/conceptions in political philosophy? Can it also be used for assessment of other than teleological theories (or parts thereof)? Is it suitable for assessment of e.g. a political theory rooted in deontology? This is an objection that might render DD_3 inadequate for assessment in political philosophy (with the exception of teleological political conceptions). However, I would argue that despite being serious, this objection does not present a fatal blow to the definition of desirability understood in terms of DD_3. After all, even a deontological conception – in which the rightness of action is determined by the action's adherence to a rule/obligation and not by the outcome of the action or the good/end sought in the action – is analyzable in terms of an end. The end, in such case, would be an action performed because of an obligation imposed by a rule. Thus, despite the seriousness of the objection, DD_3 is suitable for application even to other than teleological political conceptions/ideals, be it only in a restricted sense.

Before moving to the discussion of feasibility, it might be useful to summarize the requirements desirability criterion understood in terms of DD_3 imposes on a normative political theory or conception. Here, these requirements are formulated negatively, i.e. by stating in what way a theory in political philosophy could fail to be desirable. *X* might fail to be desirable in the following three respects:

a) *x* fails to help *y* to achieve *e*, or
b) *e* fails to be a genuinely good end of *y*, or
c) *x* fails in both respects indicated in a) and b)

From what has been said it follows that the DD_3 requirements of "*x* helping *y* to achieve *e*" and "*e* being a genuinely good end of *y*" are both necessary, but not sufficient conditions of *x* being desirable. Only if both these contentions are met, we have a sufficient reason to pronounce *x* to be desirable.

2. Feasibility

The first step in assessing a normative political theory (or a part thereof) is to analyze its desirability. However, there might be and in fact is a number of desirable normative theories that are not feasible (e.g. various utopias). One might say that to pursue and try to implement such theory would be unwise, sometimes even dangerous. A clear definition of feasibility that could be employed as an assessment criterion in political philosophy is, thus, also needed. This definition is developed in a way analogous to the definition of desirability in the preceding part:

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary lists the following definition of the term "feasible": that which "is possible and likely to be achieved" (Wehmeier 2000: 427). *Collins COBUILD – Advanced Learner's English Dictionary* defines "feasible" in the following manner: "If something is feasible, it can be done, made, or achieved" (Sinclair 2003: 523). *Macmillan English Dictionary of Advanced Learners* provides this definition: "possible or likely to succeed"

(Mayor 2002: 510). Besides dictionary definitions of "feasible" and/or "feasibility", a quick look at the synonyms of the word "feasible" might also be useful in the attempt to specify a definition of feasibility that could be used as a criterion of assessment in (teaching) political philosophy. In the *Oxford Dictionary of Synonyms and Antonyms*, one can find these words listed as synonyms of "feasible": "achievable, attainable, easy, possible, practicable, practical, realizable, viable, workable" (Spooner 1999: 150).

Based on the above dictionary definitions, one can propose the following definition of feasibility (DF):

DF: *x* is feasible if it is possible to bring it about in reality.

DF expresses a possibility-based account of feasibility (Southwood 2018: 2-3). The type of possibility referred to in DF above is not just (pure) logical possibility as used in the theory of possible worlds. The type of possibility that the DF requires is possibility understood in terms of empirical possibility.

Prima facie this definition might seem circular, and without further specification it would indeed be circular. What DF requires in order to escape circularity is an explicit specification of the limitations that put restrictions on what is empirically possible in our actual world. These limitations on feasibility can be divided into two classes of limitations:

1) those that pertain to human nature; and
2) technical limitations.[6]

There will most probably quite rightly be a great deal of disagreement about what is (the true) human nature (if such thing even exists). It is impossible here to provide an argument for the existence of human nature, much less one for what it truly consists in. However, it is a fact, that every theory/conception in political philosophy unavoidably presupposes (be it only implicitly) some view of human nature (Shapiro 1998) that can theoretically be extrapolated and made explicit. Thus, for the sake of the argument, I will take for granted that there is such thing as human nature, however, I will not try to further specify what its true character is.

Every conception that aspires to be implemented in an actual society, which might rightly be considered feasible, has to be based on recognizing a true/reasonably realistic picture of human nature. The various limitations pertaining to human nature express the requirement that a normative theory/conception, aspiring to be feasible, has to respect human nature. Clearly, there have been political arrangements based on only partially-true, even false views of human nature that were actually implemented and were not immediately rejected (e.g. various dictatorships and totalitarian regimes). However, they were unstable and eventually after some time were rejected and/or failed. Thus, even if disrespecting the limitations on feasibility imposed by human nature this does not directly prevent the implementation of a conception, it does make the implementation unstable and unfeasible in the long run. On the other hand, it

[6] Some of the various more particular limitations are mentioned below, however a broader and fuller picture is offered in e.g. Gilabert – Lawford-Smith (2012).

has to be noted that respecting human nature is only a necessary not a sufficient condition for feasibility of a political arrangement. Furthermore, respecting human nature does not enable us to design and implement a "perfect" political arrangement once for all either. This is at least partially true due to the fact that the circumstances in which human beings live change.

Technical limitations on feasibility of a political ideal require that:

a) It is logically consistent;
b) it conforms to physical laws;
c) it presumes our world history. (Jensen 2009: 172)

This second class of limitations on feasibility is not violated often (Gilabert – Lawford-Smith 2012: 811). This is understandable since technical limitations for a considerable part express what is empirically possible in our actual world. Where political philosophy is more prone to violate the criterion of feasibility is, thus, on the level of conformity with human nature. The criterion of feasibility serves two basic functions. "The first is to *rule out* political proposals on the ground that they cannot be implemented in practice. [...] In its second function feasibility enables *comparative assessments* of various proposals" (Gilabert – Lawford-Smith 2012: 812). The second function means that the criterion of feasibility enables us to decide between several desirable proposals – a more feasible proposal takes precedence over a less feasible one.

3. Desirability-Feasibility Assessment

After developing a definition of desirability (DD_3) and feasibility (DF) that could serve as assessment criteria in (teaching) political philosophy, the last step remaining to be made is to show, how the desirability-feasibility assessment (DFA) proceeds.

Above, I have developed DD_3 and DF in separate sections that might indicate that the criteria are independent of each other. If this is the case, then DFA should proceed in the following (simple) way: i.) assessment of desirability; ii.) assessment of feasibility; iii.) judgment on the conception under assessment. However, the independence of the two criteria is not something we can assume and take for granted. It might be that case that desirability of a conception is not separate from, but dependent upon its feasibility, i.e. a conception can be deemed desirable only after it has been also determined to be feasible.[7]

In an attempt to answer this question that has important implications for how the DFA proceeds and functions, I would argue we need to distinguish between two types of desirability already discussed in section dedicated to desirability above:

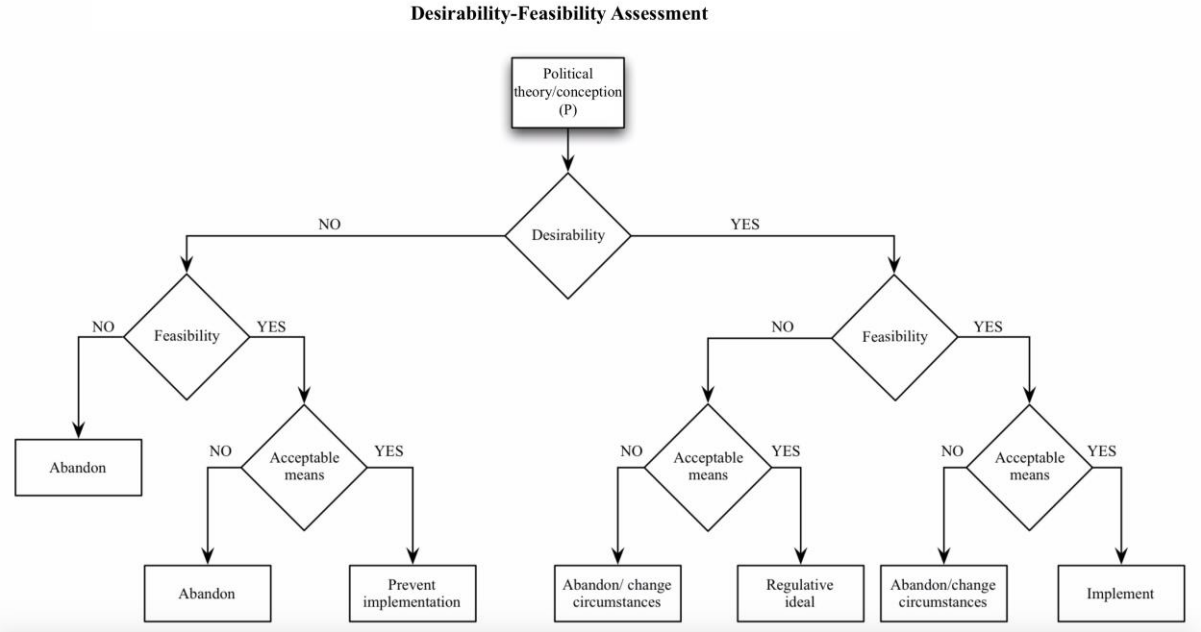
1) "two-fold desirability" – *x* is desirable in itself, but also as a means to some other end;
2) "instrumental desirability" – *x* is desirable only as a means to some end.

[7] This is a view held e.g. by Gilabert (2011); however, he later seems to abandon it in favor of the possibility to make the desirability and feasibility considerations separate (Gilabert – Lawford-Smith 2012).

Accordingly, we need to distinguish two levels, on which desirability assessment occurs:

a) desirability assessment on the higher level of a normative theory/conception as a whole;
b) desirability assessment on the lower level pertaining to the means for implementing/sustaining that theory/conception.

Desirability assessment on level a) concerns desirability 1) and should be kept separate from feasibility considerations. On the assessment level b) that concerns desirability 2), however, desirability cannot be fully separated from feasibility. The DFA process is schematically presented in the following diagram:



The first step of DFA consists in determining if *P* (normative political conception under assessment) is desirable (two-fold desirability) (DD_3). This is the first and the highest level of the DFA. Here, we make desirability considerations without, yet, having to take into consideration feasibility of *P*. If *P* is deemed desirable, we move to the second step of deciding whether it is feasible (DF). If *P* is found to be feasible (it does not contradict human nature, nor technical limitations), we proceed to the assessment of the available means for *P*'s implementation and/or sustenance. The available means for implementation and/or sustenance of a *P* are determined by the circumstances of the situation in which we make the assessment. It is important to note, that the evaluation of the available means comes back to the criterion of desirability,[8] but this time it concerns "instrumental desirability". Here we are once again asking the question if a given means will bring us to the desired end (implementing/sustaining

[8] In order to avoid confusion, on the lower level of assessment I propose to use the term "acceptability" rather than desirability of the means.

P) and combines it with the assessment of feasibility. The combination occurs since, by definition, only such means are desirable that are at the same time feasible, because the reason for the existence of a means is to get us to some end (means *qua* means can possess only instrumental desirability). If acceptable means are available, we can conclude *P* can/should be implemented. If no acceptable means are available, we can either try to change the circumstances so that we make acceptable means available, or we abandon *P*.

Another argument for keeping desirability considerations separate from feasibility considerations on the higher level is the following: if there is a *P* that was deemed desirable, and (ultimately) not feasible, but if there are acceptable means for trying to achieve this *P* we might still want to keep and pursue this *P* as a regulative ideal. As for example the strive to end world hunger/poverty – we might not ever fully succeed in reaching this desirable political goal, but we should not stop trying. If we insisted that desirability is dependent upon feasibility already on this higher level, it would mean that we should abandon the goal and thus loose a very good and important regulative ideal.

Lastly, even if a *P* is deemed undesirable on the higher level, we should still assess its feasibility. This is due to the fact that somebody ill-intentioned might persuade people to pursue an undesirable *P* that is feasible and has acceptable means available. If there are such *P*s we should be aware of them and thus be prepared to try to prevent their implementations.

After the analysis provided so far, one might ask a very relevant question of how to implement the two criteria in a particular classroom setting. Here, I will refrain from trying to provide some step-by-step implementation guide. This is due to the fact that there is a wide variety of education systems, that allow for different approaches in teaching philosophy and possibly preclude others, but also (and possibly more importantly) due to the fact that each group of students is different and unique. For these reasons, there probably is not one correct/best way how to employ DFA in education process. Each teacher wishing to use DFA in his/her in teaching will be the best architect of the most appropriate employment of the criteria in their classroom. However, I will conclude with an example that shows one possible way to employ DFA in a classroom setting and points out how it might contribute to a better understanding of a theory in political philosophy. Within a seminar on political philosophy at university level, students were assigned to read Rawls on his theory of justice as fairness. They were also asked to answer the question whether they found his theory to be desirable and feasible, without being given any particular prior definitions of the criteria. Further, they were asked to provide reasons for the outcome of their DFA of justice and fairness, i.e. indirectly and implicitly they were asked to define the criteria. When the analysis of the content of the assigned text ended, the most notable comment coming from a number of students was that they had found Rawls' justice as fairness to be unfeasible. The argument was that the veil of ignorance was "completely unfeasible" since it is impossible for someone not to know his/her race, sex, wealth, strength, conception of the good, etc. The employment of DFA was thus essential in detecting a misunderstanding of an important aspect of Rawls' idea of the original position. (Actually, Rawls models a purely hypothetical situation and the veil of ignorance requires the parties selecting the principles of justice to exclude what he considers to be morally arbitrarily information from their consideration, not in fact not knowing/forgetting it in reality).

The discussion on desirability and feasibility of justice as fairness in this group, thus, helped the students to reach a correct understanding of an essential part of Rawls' theory.

The aim of this article was to propose an analytical explication and an explicit definition of desirability and feasibility that could be used as tools for assessment in (teaching) political philosophy. When developing the definition of desirability, I have proposed a distinction between "two-fold" and "instrumental" desirability that has an important implication on how the desirability-feasibility assessment should proceed and function. The criterion of desirability was defined as DD_3: *x* is desirable if it helps *y* to achieve *e*, which is genuinely good for *y*. Feasibility was defined as DF: *x* is feasible if it is possible to bring it about in reality, and expressed that feasibility of normative political theories/conceptions/ideals is limited by technical limitations and human nature. In the last section of the article I have described the process of desirability-feasibility assessment and argued that desirability is assessed at two distinct levels that correspond to the two types of desirability. On the higher level, desirability and feasibility assessment are to be kept separate, while on the lower level desirability is dependent upon feasibility. Besides the short example in the previous paragraph, I have not described in any detail how the implementation of the proposed criteria and assessment procedure should be done in the education process. This is due to the fact that it will be heavily dependent on the particular circumstances of each classroom. However, my hope and aim were that the article might become a useful inspiration for teachers to try to adjust the proposed assessment tools to their particular needs and make use of it in teaching political philosophy.

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How to cite this article

Baňas, Ján (2019): On Assessment in Teaching Political Philosophy: Desirability and Feasibility, *Journal of Didactics of Philosophy* 3(2), 73-83. DOI: 10.46586/JDPh.2019.9564.