

Ideal vs. Non-ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map

Laura Valentini
University College London

Published in *Philosophy Compass*, 7 (9) (2012), 654–664.
(This is a pre-copyedited, pre-publication version.)

Abstract: This article provides a conceptual map of the debate on ideal and non-ideal theory. It argues that this debate encompasses a number of different questions, which have not been kept sufficiently separate in the literature. In particular, the article distinguishes between the following three interpretations of the ‘ideal vs. non-ideal theory’ contrast: (i) full compliance vs. partial compliance theory; (ii) utopian vs. realistic theory; (iii) end-state vs. transitional theory. The article advances critical reflections on each of these sub-debates, and highlights areas for future research in the field.

Introduction

In recent years, political philosophers have started to interrogate the methodology they use to develop normative prescriptions. Driving this ‘methodological turn’ in political philosophy has been a frustration with the subject’s perceived lack of influence on real-world politics. Some voiced the concern that the dominant – Rawlsian – paradigm in the discipline was somehow too detached from reality to guide political action. From this perspective, much of the current work in political philosophy is defective because it is of little (possibly no) practical help.

This methodological debate on the proper nature of political philosophy, and its ability to guide action in real-world circumstances, has become known as the debate on ideal and non-ideal theory. A quick glance at what falls under the heading ‘ideal/non-ideal theory’, however, reveals the heterogeneity of this debate. There are at least three distinct meanings given to the adjectives ‘ideal’ and ‘non-ideal’, each corresponding to a different cluster of questions.

First, ‘ideal theory’ may be taken to mean ‘full-compliance theory’, and ‘non-ideal theory’ may be understood as ‘partial compliance’ theory. If this how we think of the ideal/non-ideal distinction, then the debate on ideal and non-ideal theory focuses on the question of what duties and obligations apply to us in situations of partial compliance as opposed to situations of full compliance.

Second, ‘ideal theory’ may be taken to mean ‘utopian or idealistic theory’, and ‘non-ideal theory’ may be understood as ‘realistic’ theory. On this second reading of the ‘ideal/non-ideal’ distinction, the debate on ideal and non-ideal theory focuses on the question of whether feasibility considerations should constrain normative political theorizing and, if so, what sorts of feasibility constraints should matter.

This paper was written while I was a Fellow at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study, Uppsala, Sweden. I am grateful to the Collegium for its support, and to the other fellows for discussion. Special thanks go to Constanze Binder, Eva Erman, Pablo Gilabert, Robert Jubb, Anthony Laden, Zofia Stempłowska, Patrick Tomlin, and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful suggestions.

¹ For various attempts to systematize the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory see Stempłowska (2008), Robeyns (2008), Swift (2008), and Jubb (forthcoming).

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