

A dilemma for Laura Valentini's ideal theory paradox

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. The dilemma I present for Laura Valentini's paradox of ideal theory concerns a theory which includes idealizations but also an account of how you apply the theory to less ideal reality. If this does not count as an ideal theory, then theories of justice need not be ideal. If it does, then ideal theories can be action guiding.

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Without this paradox you would see

Items all unruly

I wish to respond to Laura Valentini's paradox of ideal theory once again, or apparent paradox. Here are the components of it:

- (a) Any sound theory of justice is action guiding.
- (b) Any sound theory of justice is ideal.
- (c) Any ideal theory fails to be action guiding.

Which proposition must go? Valentini distinguishes two senses of ideal theory in her paper:

First, a theory may be 'ideal' in a non-technical sense, insofar as it proposes an ideal of a fully just world towards which we should aim. Intuitively, it would seem that, unless a theory is ideal in this way, it cannot qualify as a normative theory of justice. Second, and more interestingly, a theory can be ideal in the technical sense of being designed under idealized, i.e. false, assumptions.

(2009: 337-338)

What about a theory which specifies an ideal and argues for it using idealizing assumptions, but also includes some account of how you apply the theory to less ideal reality? (By the way, the economist has some account of how his, or her, models are to be applied.)

The dilemma is this. EITHER you do not count this as an ideal theory, in virtue of its how-to-apply account, in which case (b) suitably interpreted,¹ is false. A “sound” theory of justice does not have to be ideal. OR you count it as ideal, in which case (c) is false: an ideal theory can be action guiding. It can be if it has a how-to-apply account, or at least it can be for those suitably motivated.² (Perhaps someone will argue that the distance between ideal and reality is always too large for any adequate how-to-apply account. I cannot see why one would think that though.)

References

Edward, T.R. 2022a. A cheap solution to Laura Valentini’s ideal theory paradox? Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/EDWACS-2>

Edward, T.R. 2022b. But why is ideal theory not action guiding? Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/EDWBWI>

Valentini, L. 2009. On the Apparent Paradox of Ideal Theory. *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 17 (3): 332-355.

¹ See Edward 2022a for the interpretive difficulty which must be overcome..

² Here I am ignoring the ontological-argument-style problem presented earlier (Edward 2022b).