The valuable role of ideal theory in current theories of justice

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I. Introduction

Since Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* was released in 1971, a resurgence of theorising about justice has taken place. Rawls approached his theory of justice with the idea that before theorists could focus on improving justice in the real world through what has become known as "non-ideal theory", they first needed to figure out the ideally just society by engaging in "ideal theory". His work therefore focused on doing ideal theory of justice. Due to its influence, many who entered the field after him focused on ideal theory too. However, this approach has been increasingly criticised over time and the value of ideal theory has become contested, with some deeming it unnecessary or even damaging in the pursuit of justice. They instead advocate for non-ideal theory to take precedence in the field and want to do away with ideal theory.

These non-ideal theorists mainly critique 4 elements of ideal theory. These are:

(1) *disregard for action guidance*

Underlying value statement (i): action guidance is valuable in theorising about justice

(2) *disregard for interpersonal differences*

Underlying value statement (ii): accounting for interpersonal differences is valuable in theorising about justice

(3) *disregard for institutionalised oppression*

Underlying value statement (iii): accounting for historical and existing institutionalised oppression is valuable in theorising about justice

(4) *distraction from non-ideal theory*

Underlying value statement (iv): engaging in non-ideal theory – which does have regard for action guidance, interpersonal differences and institutionalised oppression – is valuable in theorising about justice

In the first part of this thesis, I will provide some ways in which (1), (2) (3) and (4) have entered the debate by giving a characterisation of some of the points made by the critics of ideal theory. Next, I will move to the necessary distinction between ideal theory and idealization. Then, I will get to arguing for my suggested premise (5*): there is some value that ideal theory has beyond and irrespective of these objections and this value is not offset by the objection (1) - (4). First, I will defend the minimum amount of the value of ideal theory, the negative aspect of this premise: that objections (1) - (4) do not entirely defeat any possibility for ideal theory to be valuable. Second, I will argue for the first positive role that ideal theory can fulfill, to be the goal for politics. Third, I will suggest the second positive role for ideal theory, that of evaluating policy. Lastly, I will show how to minimise the impact of the four objections while maximising the positive contributions of ideal theory, through a discussion of Robeyns' gender justice.

I.I Contextualising objections (1) - (4)

(1) The action guidance objection

This objection contains the first issue that ideal theory is often criticised for: its lack of action guidance. There are two main elements to this often raised criticism.

First, ideal theory does not have action guidance as its aim. As Joseph Carens pointed out, ideal and non-ideal theory answer different questions rather than answering the same question in different ways.[1] These questions are: "what is necessary for a minimally just society" and "how do we improve justice/reduce injustice". The former of these is an exercise in truth-seeking, while the latter aims to actually bridge the gap between theory and reality. This means ideal theory is not primarily concerned with action guidance.

This difference in aims between ideal theory and non-ideal theory leads to a difference in methodological structure, which in turn leads to objection (1). That difference in methodological structure is found in the degree of compliance that theories assume. The methodological structure of most ideal theories assumes full compliance with its principles. Assuming full compliance with the minimally necessary conditions for justice is necessary for a theory that seeks to find true justice, rather than a *modus vivendi* as Rawls calls it.[2] In the real world, however, full compliance with principles as a requirement or expectation is infeasible. The problem here is that what people "ought" to do does not imply that they "can"

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[1] Carens, 'Realistic and Idealistic Approaches to the Ethics of Migration'.
[2] Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 133–72.

do it, in other words, that it is "feasible" to expect people to do it.[3] The lack of feasibility constraints in ideal theory limit its connection to the real world.

The objection that this leads to is that for a theory of justice to be useful, it requires a component that allows for it to bring about actual justice in the world. Ideal theory has no such action guiding component that allows it to bridge the gap between theory and feasibility. Therefore, ideal theory is vulnerable to the objection that it is not useful in constructing a relevant theory of justice.

(2) The interpersonal difference objection

The second objection addresses the fact that ideal theory treats all citizens as being comparable in worth, while we do not currently exist in a world where that is the case. This objection argues that focusing on ideal justice means that the end-product of ideal theory does not include inequalities which exist in the real world. These include gender and racial inequalities, for instance. It further argues that abstracting away from these inequalities limits the usefulness of a theory of justice, as it is precisely the people who are affected by inequality that most need improvements in terms of justice. Therefore, the disregard that ideal theory has for inequity undermines its own worth.

Susan Moller Okin emphasises that the treatment of people as equals neglects the fact that the development of capacities of women in society has been halted by their position within the family and in society.[4] Charles Mills notes that this developmental inequity is true for the black community in the United States as well and that no woman or black person is going to be *better* served by abstracting away from the inequity they endure. In a hypothetical best-case-scenario, this practice would do nothing for minorities according to Mills. In the real world, however, it is precisely these people that generally suffer injustices.[5] Kimberlé Crenshaw argues that these interpersonal differences are especially prevalent when it comes to intersectional oppressed demographics, such as women of colour.[6]

The only positive thing that abstraction away from interpersonal differences can contribute is to show the difference between a just society and the current state of affairs, where inequality is so common. But by assuming interpersonal differences do not exist in the methodology of an ideal theory without noting specifically what is being abstracted away from, the theory cannot hope to have something to say about that contrast or how to move

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[3] Erman and Möller, 'A World of Possibilities'.
[4] Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*.
[5] Mills, '"Ideal Theory" as Ideology'.
[6] Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex'.

towards the ideal. Some distinctions on the subject of abstraction and idealizations will be made in the next chapter to flesh out why objections (2) and (3) can be so damaging to ideal theories.

(3) The institutionalised oppression objection

The third objection points to the massive underlying differences in historical and current treatment of certain groups in society by institutions that are supposed to be impartial. Existing institutionalised inequality is disregarded by ideal theorists when they consider a basic structure of ideally just institutions. Rawls, for instance, assumes natural and historical circumstances to be reasonably favourable.[7] As Mills points out, for women and people of colour this has never been the case. This would be unproblematic if ideal theorists did not want there to be some connection between their theory and the real world. However, most, if not all, do want there to be some kind of connection. That desire means that reasonably favourable institutional conditions cannot be assumed, because they are unrealistic. When this assumption is made, the institutional structure that the ideal theory comes up with is liable to keep in place institutions that are just when operating under favourable conditions, but which are unjust in reality. This led Mills to see ideal theory as an "ideology" that protects the status quo of institutional oppression, because it neglects history of institutional oppression.[8] This third objection argues that the modus operandi of ideal theory means that institutionalised oppression can persist, which makes ideal theory damaging to the appeal of a theory of justice.

Some examples are given by Mills, Mackinnon and Shelby. As pointed out by Mills, demographic dominance of white males in political philosophy mirrors the historical dominance of white males in legislation and creating institutions. Institutions present today inherit parts of their structure and functioning from eras in which they served to maintain an oppressive status quo, a clear example being that multiple founding fathers of the United States were also slave holders. The institutional structure of the country was decided in a time when racial and gender inequalities were far reaching. It was also decided by people who participated in and benefited from these inequalities. These inequalities leaked into the institutional structure. Although social reforms have attempted to remove them, their legacy of institutionalised inequality is still present. When the current reformed structure of an institution such as the legal system is evaluated, that legacy could be missed. Institutions

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[7] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice (Revised).*, 102–70.
[8] Mills, '"Ideal Theory" as Ideology'.

themselves can be just in structure but not in effect, because of inherited inequities in the world.[9]

One such oppressive institution is argued for by feminist theorist Catharine Mackinnon, who considers the Liberal State in the United States to be jurisprudentially male, because it is focused on negative freedom. This focus on negative freedom means that rights are only extended insofar as they are a protection from intervention by the state. This leads civil rights to be an extended domain of social rights. Men who dominated social rights before the state's creation are therein protected from intervention against that status quo.[10]

Another example comes from Shelby. According to him, "Institutional racism can exist even when the content of the rules and procedures of an institution, when viewed in the abstract, is perfectly just, provided there is pervasive racial bias in the application of those rules and procedures."[11] He goes on to argue that this is the case in many ghettos, where the wrongful application of rules has led to unjust social conditions. Long-standing racial stereotypes have created a vicious circle of stigmatization by institutions of the ghetto poor. The people in ghettos respond to the stigma that prevents them from getting out of the unjust social conditions by learning of skill sets surrounding street crime. This in turn leads to more stigmatization.[12]

As demonstrated by these examples, institutional oppression is still widespread. This is a result not only of injustice in the institutional structure, but also in the current and historical application of that structure. This last element is not accounted for by many ideal theories, meaning its influence can persist. This disregard for institutional oppression therefore damages the relevance of ideal theory in theorising about justice.

(4) The distraction objection

The fourth objection is subject to some debate, the arguments in which go as follows. On one side, Mills argues that doing ideal theory of justice is worse than useless: it is damaging. His argument is that all the attention and time given to research engaging in ideal theory distracts from scholars within the field who are doing research that provides action-guidance to improve the world.[13] On the other side, Adam Swift provides a counterclaim to this argument, defending ideal theory with the following argument: we do not

[9] Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*.
[10] MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*.
[11] Shelby, 'Justice, Deviance, and the Dark Ghetto'., 131
[12] Shelby, 'Justice, Deviance, and the Dark Ghetto'.
[13] Mills, '"Ideal Theory" as Ideology'.

criticise those who work in fields other than political theory for not being action-guiding in terms of justice, let's say someone working in philosophy of language or a bricklayer. When a philosopher engaging in theory of justice focuses their research on exploring ideal theory of justice for the sake of itself, aiming for reaching truth rather than action-guidance, we should therefore also not criticise them for not having the focus of their research be non-ideal theory.[14]

Yet Mills argues that the alleged comparability between the relationship of a bricklayer and a non-ideal theorist on the one hand and the relationship of an ideal theorist and a non-ideal theorist on the other is a false equivalence. Instead, contrary to Swift's argument, there is a difference between those two relationships, namely that the latter shares the same field of theorising about justice. Since Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* came out, that field has been dominated by ideal theory. Mills argues that any research done in ideal theory perpetuates this emphasis, diverting attention away from the work that has to be done in non-ideal theory, which is more valuable than ideal theory because it is action guiding and could thus make an impact on the real world.[15]

David Estlund responds to Mill's sentiment, which has ideal theory as a distraction, in his Utopophobia by saying this argument might impact the value of ideal theory value beyond truth-seeking. However, he does fervently defend the truth-seeking aspect of ideal theory.[16] In section III, this truth-seeking aspect will be used to put forth the first interpretation of ideal theory as valuable.

I.II Assumptions and starting point

Because the scope of this thesis does not include entering into an evaluative discussion of the value ethics that support (i) (ii) (iii) and (iv), these value statements will be accepted for the remainder of this thesis to be axiomatically true. This means that objections (1) - (4), if correct, decrease the value of certain types of ideal theory.

As a counter-argument here it is possible to argue that objections (1) - (4) only serve as objections against certain types of ideal theory. The interpersonal differences objection is less effective for narrow ideal theories. Robeyns' own ideal gender justice theory centred around the main minimally necessary conditions for gender justice is deliberately focused and thus a very partial account of justice in terms of how much of an ideally just society it

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[14] Swift, 'The Value of Philosophy in Nonideal Circumstances'.
[15] Mills, '"Ideal Theory" as Ideology'.
[16] Estlund, 'Utopophobia', 2014.

describes. In providing this account, Robeyns does not abstract away from any interpersonal differences in a way that seems to suffer from objection (2), in fact it seems to be a direct address of (2). And even if someone were to argue that my analysis misses a component of Robeyns' gender justice account that does suffer from (2), it seems infeasible to argue that there couldn't be any version of deliberately extremely partial ideal theory that does not entirely succumb to objection (2).[17]

There could be a rebuttal of this argument by critics that would argue against the idea that this is infeasible. These critics could argue that in fact this is not feasible for some reason *x*. I'll not go into this further. Through this example, I've attempted to show that it could at the very least be argued that some kinds of ideal theory do not suffer from one or more of the objections (1) - (4), convincingly or unconvincingly so.

For the purpose of this thesis, however, I will accept that (1) - (4) are objections against ideal theory as a whole, because that is the starting point for my central claim.

I.III Premise (5*) and the net-positive value of ideal theory

The central claim of this thesis is that even if (i) - (iv) are true and even if (1) - (4) are objections to ideal theory as a whole, a conclusion that is sometimes inferred from (1) - (4) does not follow.

This conclusion that is proposed by some who critique ideal theory and/or engage in non-ideal theorising is:

rejected (C): *we can do away with ideal theory of justice altogether*

This conclusion suggests that a further premise (5) is assumed, which I will also reject:

rejected (5): *there are no other elements which make ideal theory valuable and that offset (1) - (4) in terms of value in theorising about justice*

Contrary to the rejected versions of (C) and (5), I will argue that even if (i) - (iv) are true and even if (1) - (4) are objections that do decrease the value of all kinds of ideal theory, this premise (5) is untrue and therefore (C) is untrue: ideal theory does retain some value in theory of justice. To this end I will suggest my own premise (5*):

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[17] Robeyns, 'Ideal Theory in Theory and Practice'; Robeyns, 'Sen's Capability Approach and Gender Inequality'; Robeyns, 'When Will Society Be Gender Just?'

(5*): *there is some value that ideal theory has beyond and irrespective of these objections and this value is not offset by the objection (1) - (4)*

The positive aspect of my suggested new premise (5*) is that there does exist value beyond (1) - (4), which I will argue comes in two aspects that ideal theory provides to theorising about justice. First, ideal theory sets a goal that non-ideal theory and policy can strive for. Second, ideal theory is an instrument for evaluation of policy by providing the benchmark according to which evaluation of policy can be done. Without providing a goal for real politics and a way to evaluate real policy, our theories of justice would not be as appealing. Ideal theory fulfills these roles and derives its value from that fact. The negative aspect of premise (5*) is that this value is not offset by the objections (1) - (4) which I will also argue holds true.

This will lead me to my suggested (C):

(C): *ideal theory does retain a valuable role in theorising about justice and we cannot do away with it even if (1) - (4) are damaging objections to ideal theory as a whole and not only pertain to specific kinds of ideal theory each*

II. Ideal theory vs. Idealization

Before arguing for this conclusion, however, it is first important to note that ideal theory isn't the same as idealization. The definitions of ideal and non-ideal theory are still subject to debate and sometimes this means ideal theory is wrongfully equated to idealization.

Ideal theory was originally defined by Rawls as normative theory about justice that assumes full compliance and reasonably favourable social conditions.[18] This definition has been expanded over time and was divided most clearly by Valentini, when she divided the ideal vs. non-ideal theory debate in three: partial-compliance vs. full-compliance theory, realistic theory vs. utopian theory and transitional theory vs. end-state theory.[19] The definition of ideal theory has developed along these 3 subsections of the debate and since Rawls the spectrum of what can be considered ideal theory has changed to the point where his definition can no longer capture ideal theory wholly and accurately. The current definition of ideal theory in terms of the question that it seeks to answer is perhaps best stated by Robeyns: "what is minimally necessary for a just society?".[20] The negative definition given by Stemplowska demarcates ideal theory as being all theory about justice that "does not aim to give achievable and desirable definitions".[21] This definition divides the two approaches to theorising about justice to nearly coincide with those theories for which objections (1), (2) and (3) are successful objections. All of these definitions are in part or wholly correct and having given some overview of the different interpretations, it will not be necessary to stick to one of the modern versions. For the remainder of this text, ideal theory can be interpreted through the lenses of Valentini, Robeyns and Stemplowska interchangeably.

What is clear, however, is that the meaning of idealization is different from ideal theory, although it is involved in ideal theory. The version of the word idealization that is relevant for this use of the word follows the definition by Collins English Dictionary: "a general theoretical account of natural phenomena that ignores features that are difficult to accommodate within a theory".[22] The key word in this definition is 'ignores'. The way in which idealization operates in theorising about justice is contested, but it would be misguided to equate it with ideal theory.

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[18] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice (Revised).*, xi–40, 102–70.
[19] Valentini, 'Ideal vs. Non-Ideal Theory'.
[20] Robeyns, 'Ideal Theory in Theory and Practice'.
[21] Stemplowska, 'What's Ideal About Ideal Theory?'
[22] 'Collins English Dictionary - Complete and Unabridged: Idealization'.

According to O'Neill there are two types of idealization within theorising about justice that are used.[23] First, there is idealization-as-abstraction. This is idealization that abstracts away from certain predicates that are true of the world, the natural phenomena in the Collins definition, but does not alter or deny their truth-value in this process. O'Neill notes that these abstractions are unavoidable in doing ideal theory. Because of the degree of complexity and multiplicity of the world, a single ideal theory cannot possibly accommodate every phenomenon. Therefore some degree of idealization-as-abstraction is always involved in the process of ideal theory. This is also the case for non-ideal theory. Non-ideal theory is more focused on avoiding it as much as possible, but any theory cannot hope to account for all phenomena in existence without engaging in some simplification.[24]

Second, there is idealization-as-idealizing. These are idealizations that do augment the content of the predicates that the idealization simplifies. This practice operates on a different definition of idealization, because it emphasises its tendency to regard predicates in an 'ideal' form. It idealizes in the sense of assuming falsehoods about its predicates. The famous *homo economicus* that is often used in economics is a case of idealization-as-idealizing that assumes rationality and perfect self-interest of its agent that can never exist in real life. In the case of the *homo economicus* the idealization-as-idealizing can still be helpful in looking at rational choice theory and as O'Neill notes this type of idealization is not necessarily damaging.[25]

Idealization does succumb to the dangers of objections (2) and (3) rather often though. This is illustrated by Robeyns' conception of so-called "bad idealizations". According to her idealization-as-idealizing can contribute to ideal theory in the way the *homo economicus* does in economics. Her example here is Dworkin's idealization that assumes away the influence of prejudices on people's authentic preferences in his account of ideal theory. This is helpful, because it is justified, according to Robeyns, to assume away injustices in theorising what a just society looks like if that is required for the proper social conditions for a situation of justice to occur.[26] Very often, however, engaging in idealization-as-idealizing is not necessary for the theory to function. In these cases assuming falsehoods is used as a way of cutting corners in reaching social conditions for justice. Robeyns' example here is the often made assumption that people are not dependent on care from others. This assumes a falsehood

[23] O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue*, 38–65; O'Neill, 'Abstraction, Idealization and Ideology in Ethics'.
[24] O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue*, 38–65; O'Neill, 'Abstraction, Idealization and Ideology in Ethics'.
[25] O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue*, 38–65; O'Neill, 'Abstraction, Idealization and Ideology in Ethics'.
[26] Robeyns, 'Ideal Theory in Theory and Practice'; Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality*.

about a predicate, as most if not all people do rely on the care of others. It is unnecessary because it cannot be justified as being a necessary assumption that removes a certain kind of injustice in order to successfully achieve its theory of a just society, because in any just society reliance on the care of others would always still be present as illness or physical damage are unavoidable facts of human existence. It is also damaging because idealizing away from people's dependence on the care of others means that distribution of care or distributive justice surrounding care is not addressed in the theory. This can be the case if the theory is explicitly partial in not having justice surrounding care as an element to it, as opposed to being comprehensive on the issue. However, when an issue such as care is assumed away whilst rightfully being part of a theory, this is a case of bad idealization.[27]

It is important to emphasise that although bad idealizations are the only form of idealization that is necessarily bad, necessary idealization-as-abstraction and useful idealization-as-idealizing can still be criticised. It cannot be denied that some form of simplification of predicates is necessary in every theory, if one is in agreement with the premise that no single theory can ever truly account for every single phenomenon in the world, a premise that seems true. Thus, idealization-as-abstraction is necessary, but can be regarded as a necessary evil.

The use of useful idealization-as-idealizing is more contested: it is supported by feminist theorists like O'Neill and Robeyns, whose example was Dworkin's removal of prejudice in just society. However, it is also rejected by feminist theorists like Schwartzman and Khader. For Schwartzman, this rejection rests on any form of idealization-as-idealizing that further limits the action-guidance of ideal theory, meaning that it exacerbates the impact of objection (1).[28] For Khader, idealizations made by ideal theorists have created a false opposition between anti-cultural relativism and critiques of transnational feminist theorising by neglecting the agency of "other" women. She argues that if that agency was recognised, both positions could be held simultaneously. But because generalisations are constructed through idealization-as-idealizing, this is not the commonly held view. This ties idealization-as-idealizing to objections (2) and (3).[29]

Charles Mills too is against idealization-as-idealizing, stating that ideal theories often make "significantly false assumptions" and that this practice never benefits the people that these assumptions are made about, as idealization-as-idealizing usually idealizes injustices

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[27] Robeyns, 'Ideal Theory in Theory and Practice'.
[28] Schwartzman, *Challenging Liberalism*; Anderson, 'Toward a Non-Ideal, Relational Methodology for Political Philosophy'.
[29] Khader, 'Transnational Feminisms, Nonideal Theory, and "Other" Women's Power'.

surrounding   gender and racial justice. For Mills, the example of Dworkin's idealization-as-idealizing about the influence of prejudice is damaging because it neglects answering the all important question of how to reach or approach that state of non-prejudice by idealizing away from it, meaning that the people that suffer from prejudices are not helped by the idealization. Idealization-as-idealizing here becomes another way to make a blanket statement about a utopia that can never come to be as long as we keep engaging in idealizing. He therein finds idealization-as-idealizing damaging because of a combination of all of the objections (1) - (4).[30]

This view is rather extreme, however, and this thesis aims to prove the value of ideal theory in theorising about justice through illustrating its interactive role with non-ideal theory. Agreeing that any form of idealization-as-idealizing is damaging, even if it is consciously justified by its role in the social conditions of a just society, would not allow any examination of ideal theory's value, as it would strawman the value of ideal theory by means of objections (1) - (4) before my proposed premise (5*) could be even be examined.

For the purpose of my argument and because it seems the most plausible account, the version of idealization-as-abstraction vs. idealization-as-idealizing that is suggested by Hamlin and Stemplowska will be held to. On this view, there exists a complex spectrum between pure idealization-as-abstraction as defined by O'Neill and bad idealizations along the lines of Robeyns' definition. This is convincing, because the middle-ground between these two extremes is often murky. Ideal and non-ideal theory cannot be strictly divided as engaging only in idealization-as-abstraction or idealization-as-idealizing, because sometimes simplification is necessary but it is unclear what the relationship of that simplification is to the outcomes of the theory.

Here, the example of Dworkin could be helpful again. In Robeyns' view, abstracting away from the injustices that follow from people's prejudices about each other is necessary in constructing a theory about what a just society looks like, because not having these injustices is part of what is minimally necessary for there to be a just society. She could therefore say that this is not a case of bad idealization. However, Mills points out that in outcome this practice is unhelpful to the very people that are affected by these injustices and that the outcomes for them are often neutral at best and damaging at worst. Therefore, if a consequentialist view is taken, it could also be argued that it is a case of bad idealization, because of objections (2) or (3). Often the middle-ground cases that are somewhere between

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[30] Mills, '"Ideal Theory" as Ideology'.

idealization-as-abstraction and bad idealizations operate in this way, making the argument for a complex and not yet elucidated spectrum between the two quite convincing.[31]

As is now clear, ideal theory cannot be equated to any of these definitions of idealization. The exploration of the different forms of idealization is also helpful for another reason, though, as it may seem like a critique of idealization-as-idealizing would be a good candidate to form a separate objection (5) to ideal theory. However, as demonstrated in the discussion of Schwartzman's, Khader's and Mills' critiques of ideal theory, the more ultimate reasoning for why it is damaging to an ideal theory usually relies on objections (1) - (4). Furthermore, idealization-as-idealizing is part of the methodology of ideal theory to answer its central question about minimally necessary conditions for just society. This cannot succeed with high degrees of malicious gender or racial prejudices that are sadly still in place in the world. Therefore, although it is a part of the methodology that is often specifically criticised and although the discussion of criticism and confusion surrounding idealization is necessary, it is not a separate objection to ideal theory. Rather it can intertwine with all the objections (1) - (4).

The type of ideal theory that I will henceforth refer to in my argument for the positive value of ideal theory, is ideal theory which does not engage in bad idealization or the parts of more comprehensive ideal theories that do not engage in it. The parts of ideal theory that do engage in bad idealizations are not valuable in the ways that my premise (5*) seeks to establish. To discern what kinds of ideal theory do retain the valuable role that premise (5*) aims to explore, it is important for ideal theorists to be conscious of the limits of their theory. To avoid succumbing to bad idealization, it has become essential for any ideal theory to describe the purpose of the idealization-as-idealizing in the theory and to reflectively delineate its own limitations.[32] In other words, ideal theory needs to properly recognise its own role, which I will now move to by arguing for my premise (5*).

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[31] Hamlin and Stemplowska, 'Theory, Ideal Theory and the Theory of Ideals'.
[32] Stemplowska and Swift, 'Ideal and Nonideal Theory'; Swift, 'The Value of Philosophy in Nonideal Circumstances'; Robeyns, 'Ideal Theory in Theory and Practice'; O'Neill, 'Abstraction, Idealization and Ideology in Ethics'; Watson, 'Toward a Feminist Theory of Justice'; Schwartzman, *Challenging Liberalism*; Anderson, 'Toward a Non-Ideal, Relational Methodology for Political Philosophy'; Jaggar, *Gender and Global Justice*; Estlund, 'Utopophobia', 2014; Sreenivasan, 'What Is Non-Ideal Theory?'

III. Truth: the minimal value of ideal theory

My argument for premise (5*) will first establish its negative aspect, namely that granting (1) - (4) as objections to ideal theory does not defeat the possibility of ideal theory having value beyond that. This argument will set out to prove that there is value in truth seeking for the sake of itself, even when the theory does not even attempt to thwart any of the objections (1) - (4) and fully embraces them. The type of ideal theory that this results in is perhaps most famously explored by G.A. Cohen and is sometimes referred to as utopian theory.[33]

Cohen's ideal theory rests on his position that there are most ultimate normative principles that underlie all our further normative principles and our ideas about facts and, importantly, that these normative principles are fact-insensitive.[34] I will briefly give an overview of his argument for this, which goes as follows:

(1) A given normative principle P1 is supported by fact F1, which in turn is supported by normative principle P2 which explains why F1 supports P1. P2 is explained by F2 and why F2 supports P2 is explained by P3. This chain continues forming a regress.

(2) This regress cannot be infinite, as he poses a constraint that one has an understanding of their reasoning and this would not be the case if the regress is infinite, because there then would not be an ultimate reasoning.

(C) Because there always has to be a more ultimate principle that explains why a fact supports a principle and because this regress has to end somewhere, it has to end in an ultimate fact-insensitive normative principle.

This argument by Cohen from *Facts and Principles* has been discussed heavily in the debate, but giving an overview of that discussion would distract from the main line of argumentation in this thesis and is unnecessary for the success of my argument. It suffices to say here that although several counter arguments have been raised against Cohen's

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[33] Valentini, 'Ideal vs. Non-Ideal Theory'; Cohen, 'Facts and Principles'; Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*.
[34] Cohen, 'Facts and Principles'.

fact-insensitive principles, his argument for them has by no means been defeated utterly or completely.[35]

As one can imagine, the ideal theory of justice that Cohen offers, that he builds on the basis of this claim that there exist ultimate fact-insensitive principles, seeks to explore what exactly these principles are. In Cohen's view they are not one, but multiple fundamental principles that relate to justice but that are entirely lacking a connection with any facts about the world or feasibility. This means that Cohen's theory does not attempt any form of action guidance, in line with Joseph Carens' idea. However, this also means, and in this way Cohen is more unique, that he does not make any attempt at mitigating (2) or (3), because he sees no necessary connection between ideal theory and interpersonal differences or institutionalised oppression. Here it is important to note that this lack of a connection does not challenge (i) - (iii) necessarily; doing ideal theory without regard for these elements need not mean that doing non-ideal theory with regard for them is less valuable.[36]

The key argument here is that there exists a kind of ideal theory that fully accepts (1) - (3) without the success of its ideas being harmed by it. This has the further consequence that (4) is also less harmful. Cohen's utopian ideal theory, because it is so extreme and because it does not attempt to mitigate (1) - (3), is further from non-ideal theory than any other kind of ideal theory. This means that (4) is less harmful for Cohen than for any other ideal theory, because Cohen's ideal theory does not occupy the same space as non-ideal theory. As explained in the dedicated section, the main argument given by Mills and other critics that see ideal theory as distracting from non-ideal theory is that the two are part of the same field: theorising about justice. This is less the case with Cohen's theory than with any other, because his theory is not attempting to make any connection with the real world. This leaves Cohen's ideal theory as a different enterprise to the Rawlsian ideal theories, who seek to establish the ideal theory *in order* to then move to the non-ideal theory. This means that theorists who engage in Cohen's type of ideal theory are doing very dissimilar work to non-ideal theorists, which gives more support to Swift's comparison to the bricklayer not needing to attempt to be action guiding in terms of justice.[37]

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[35] Some relevant texts for further exploration of this debate that were consulted but not used: Miller, 'Taking Up the Slack?'; Miller, 'Political Philosophy for Earthlings'; Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed*; Rossi, 'Facts, Principles, and (Real) Politics'.

[36] Cohen, 'Facts and Principles'; Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*; Carens, 'Realistic and Idealistic Approaches to the Ethics of Migration'.

[37] Cohen, 'Facts and Principles'; Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*; Mills, '"Ideal Theory" as Ideology'; Rawls, *A Theory of Justice (Revised)*.

If Cohen's theory is not attempting to bridge towards non-ideal theory, however, it is also unclear what value it has. The acceptance of the objections means that it cannot claim to have any value in relation to the world, as that acceptance knee-caps the theory in this regard. Its value is not derived from getting us to the state of justice that it theorises, for this is not its aim. Its aim is simply to arrive at a theoretical state of justice. As Estlund notes: "the truth about justice is not constrained by considerations of the likelihood of success in realizing it".[38] It can therefore be said that an ideal theory of this kind is seeking truth for the sake of itself.

It is then left to argue for the value of truth in order to prove the negative aspect of my premise (5*). Discussing this in depth would require engaging in epistemic value theories and their relation to veritism, which bases the value of holding a belief on its truth-value. There are those who disagree that truth has intrinsic value as well. Therefore, the value of utopian theory rests on the outcome of an entirely different debate. Arguing against utopian theory with this line of argument is attacking a straw man argument, however, this should be subject to debate in epistemology and not in justice theory. The outcome of this debate would impact a wide range of theories, non-ideal theories as well. Therefore it does not seem fruitful to object on this basis, as it would be a straw man. Thus, my previous conclusion can withstand the objection that truth has no intrinsic value and utopian theory represents a form of ideal theory that suffers as little as possible from objections (1) - (4) and does contribute positive value to theory surrounding justice.[39]

There are perhaps objectors to this approach because of disagreement with earlier mentioned parts of the utopian methodology surrounding fact-insensitivity of ultimate principles. However, it would be difficult for those objectors to argue that utopian theory suffers very much from objections (1) - (4) without incurring the reply that the utopian theorist simply has a difference in aims from the non-ideal theorist. Utopian theory would therefore almost certainly survive objections against it on this basis as well. With the value of truth in mind, utopian theory represents a possible way in which ideal theory retains positive value in theory surrounding justice.

This establishes one way in which the negative aspect of premise (5*) could work: that while granting (1) - (4) as objections to it the value of ideal theory is not necessarily negative. I will now move to arguing that ideal theory does not have to be limited to the extreme of utopian theory in order to have positive value.

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[38] Estlund, 'Utopophobia', 2014.
[39] Moretti, Hartl, and Gyarmathy, 'The Value of Truth'.

IV. Positive role 1: Ideal theory as the goal for politics

An important part of obtaining positive value is to not be affected too heavily by the objections (1) - (4). In the section on idealization, I showed that ideal theories need to generally be more conscious of their own limits was one that helped lessen the impact of all the objections. However, this perhaps least applied to the action guidance that objection (1) is concerned with. Utopian theory served as an example of how an ideal theory can limit the impact of that objection, but the way in which it did so is by distancing itself further from action guidance instead of obtaining some valuable role in it. Having the valuable role of a theory be solely the pursuit of truth is one option, as found in the utopian theories of Cohen and Estlund in his *Utopophobia*.[40]

In addition to this approach, however, there are at least two more aspects of ideal theory that can ensure it to have value in theorising about justice. Contrary to utopian theory, both of these do maintain some relationship between ideal theory and non-ideal theory. The first is the inspirational role of ideal theory in policy-making. This is seemingly at odds with (1), which I have granted to be a working objection against ideal theory earlier in this thesis. To explore how this can work while not challenging objection (1) directly or underlying claim (i), I will argue for a difference between direct action guidance and indirect action guidance. The former relates to the theory being action guiding itself, whereas the latter has it being a tool that can be used in action guiding theories. To differentiate direct and indirect action guidance I will start by further fleshing out objection (1) through a discussion of the arguments made by Sen against ideal theory being sufficient or necessary for non-ideal theory. These arguments will be used as they have become paradigmatic and contain some of the most commonly raised versions of objection (1), the "gap" between ideal theory and the real world for instance. After discussing them, I will then demonstrate that Robeyns actually agrees with this version of (1). Whereas those who would do away with ideal theory see this gap as unbridgeable, Robeyns sees future non-ideal theory as filling this gap. This mitigates some of the problems objection (1) poses, but it leaves one argument given by Sen standing: ideal theory is not necessary for non-ideal theory. Still, I will argue for the inspirational role in policy-making that ideal theory can have. Through it, ideal theory is indirectly action guiding.

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[40] Cohen, 'Facts and Principles'; Estlund, *Utopophobia*, 2019.

IV.I Sen's arguments against the sufficiency and necessity of ideal theory

Starting with Sen's now paradigmatic criticism of ideal theory's role in action guidance, Sen famously argued for a form of objection (1) in a stronger sense than *disregard for action guidance*. Rawls justified his focus on ideal theory by arguing that it was necessary to work out ideal theory before being able to engage in "the more pressing task" of non-ideal theory. This Rawlsian argument can be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand one could interpret ideal theory to be sufficient for doing non-ideal theory, on the other hand a slightly weaker but more likely interpretation could be that ideal theory is necessary for non-ideal theory. Sen argues against both of these interpretations that ideal theory is neither necessary nor sufficient for non-ideal theory. He gradually builds this argument up, starting with whether ideal theory is sufficient for engaging in non-ideal theory and then moving to challenging the two kinds of necessity relationships that ideal theory might have with non-ideal theory.[41]

He starts by saying that ideal theory is insufficient for getting to non-ideal theory. This claim relies on the common objection that a large distance exists between an ideal theory and the real world. This is an objection that follows from (1). As discussed in the section that noted the main points of each objection, the methodological structure of ideal theory assumes a higher degree of compliance than is realistic out in the world. This means that for the ideal theory to be translated into theory that is suitable for action guidance some aspects of it need to be changed. This is what creates a kind of "gap", because it is unclear how the clarity of the ideal can be applied to the often messy real world. This application would require an understanding of the comparative distance between a society and the ideal, which in turn requires a multi-dimensional metric that is able to compare different facets of distance to different degrees and in differing directions from the starting point. Ideal theorists, Rawls included, have not been able to provide such a system of metrics. Because this metric is not provided, ideal theory is therefore not sufficient by itself to come to non-ideal theory or action guidance.[42] This line of argument is widely accepted and Sen does not regard this as his main "new" argument against ideal theory priority over non-ideal theory.[43]

The main argument follows when he argues against the necessity of ideal theory for non-ideal theory. This two-part argument begins by arguing against the stronger form of

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[41] Sen, 'What Do We Want from a Theory of Justice?'; Sen, *The Idea of Justice*.
[42] Sen, 'What Do We Want from a Theory of Justice?', 219–21; Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 98–101.
[43] Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 96.

necessity, conditional necessity. This form of necessity is based on ideal theory having temporal priority over non-ideal theory. Temporal priority creates a strong necessity, because it makes non-ideal theory completely conditionally reliant on ideal theory. Sen's claim against this form of necessity is that when discerning whether something improves justice, it is unnecessary to first find the most just version of society.[44] He supports this claim with a famous example, which goes as follows: when asked to discern whether Kanchenjunga or Mont Blanc is the taller mountain, the height of Mount Everest, the tallest mountain in the world, is unnecessary and even irrelevant to finding the answer.[45] This does not only apply to mountains though, it can apply to social justice too. Here the example Sen provides is the abolishment of slavery, which is one case which is so universally seen to improve social justice, that knowledge of the most just society is unnecessary for anyone to recognise the advancement of justice by its enactment.[46]

The stronger kind of necessity, conditional necessity through temporal priority, which Rawls assigned to ideal theory, is thereby disputed by Sen. He then further challenges a weaker kind of necessity: inter-alia necessity. That form of necessity claims that although there might not be temporal priority of ideal theory, there is still a relationship of necessity between the two theories. The intuition here is that if one is able to comparatively choose between two alternatives concerning non-ideal justice theory in a given society, then the ideal must be discernible too.[47] To make that intuition clearer I will apply it to Sen's example of the comparisons of the tallest mountains. As argued by Sen, it is unnecessary to know the height of Mount Everest to know whether Kanchenjunga or Mont Blanc is a taller mountain. Now the intuition of this weaker kind of necessity means that although the knowledge of the height of Mount Everest is unnecessary for this case, knowledge of it will follow from knowing which mountain between Kanchenjunga and Mont Blanc is taller, because discerning this requires knowledge of the metric, which can be applied to finding out the tallest mountain. The metric here is height and if one notices which mountain is taller, one can also find out which is the tallest by using the same method, whether that would be a precise metric or a comparative one. This means that ideal theory necessarily is still related to non-ideal theory in this way.

Sen, however, does not believe even in this weaker kind of necessity. His argument is that it would only work in a well-ordered set of examples. Once the examples become

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[44] Sen, 'What Do We Want from a Theory of Justice?', 215–17.
[45] Sen, 222; Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 101–2.
[46] Sen, 'What Do We Want from a Theory of Justice?', 216; Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 21–22.
[47] Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 102.

intersectional and only a partial and more muddy ranking can be made, the intuition no longer holds. This means that it may work for looking at the tallest mountain, but that it would not when applied to social justice. Again, an example most clearly demonstrates this idea. Sen's example that could be applied here is about which child should receive a flute. In the example child A is the only one that can play the flute, child B has no other toys, and child C has built the flute. For a utilitarian, child A might present the best case to get the flute because they would get the most utility out of playing it, another option for the utilitarian is child B if they get even more utility out of getting their first toy. For a libertarian or a marxist the answer is clearly child C, because they are entitled to the fruits of their labour. For an egalitarian child B would be the favoured child. The point being that each of these theorists would have a reasonable claim to giving the flute to one of the children based on different criteria. The presence of those different criteria means that in the real world, when all of them are combined, the flute would go to one of the children. But because the beliefs of the persons involved are incongruent, there is no well-ordered ranking of priority that points to an ideal choice. Instead, the group of theorists would end up with a messy, partial, and intersectional ranking of criteria.[48] This is how this intuition functions when applied to social justice according to Sen, and in this case no clear metric is available to measure the distance from an ideal, which itself is not discernible from the result of who gets the flute, because of the incongruent but justifiable arguments given by the different parties. This means that Sen disputes even the weaker inter-alia necessity relationship. He thinks non-ideal theory can be done without any relation to ideal theory.[49] Consequently, the second half of the relationship that Rawls alluded to, that ideal theory matters insofar as it is fundamental to a theory of justice and to be able to do non-ideal theory no longer holds and ideal theory does not seem to have a role in action guidance, as it is both insufficient and unnecessary for it and cannot be deduced from it. This supports (1) as a working objection against ideal theory.

IV.II Indirect action guidance

However, direct action guidance is not the only form of action guidance.[50] Ideal theory, though not directly action guiding as per (1), can be *indirectly* action guiding by setting a goal that a society aims for.

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[48] Sen, 'What Do We Want from a Theory of Justice?', 224–26; Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 12–15.
[49] Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 102–5.
[50] Chahboun, 'Ideal Theory and Action-Guidance'.

In this case ideal theory has inspirational value. The idea here is that through providing a conception of a just society, ideal theory inspires policy to move further towards that aim. By having this role as the goal for politics to work towards, ideal theory is indirectly action guiding.

Robeyns holds the view that ideal theory, non-ideal theory, and action design and implementation are the three aspects that occupy the space of theories of justice. She sees ideal theory as fulfilling this agenda-setting goal that is modified to fit fact-sensitive and partially compliant aspects of the real world by non-ideal theory, which is then implemented by action design and implementation.[51] The relationship between these three elements is thus linear, there is ideal theory on one extreme and action design and implementation on the other, with non-ideal theory existing as the bridge between the two somewhere in the middle.

This view might remind of the temporal priority of ideal theory as suggested by Rawls, which would mean objectors could argue that Sen's argument against this kind of necessity would apply to ideal theory as the goal for politics.[52] However, this would be misunderstanding the operation of ideal theory as the goal for politics and non-ideal theory. When conditions in a society are entirely unjust, it could be fairly intuitive to distinguish which of any given options are preferable in terms of justice. Sen suggests that the abolishment of slavery for instance is so clearly more just than the existence of slavery that it requires absolutely no referrence to any kind of ideal justice to decide between the two.[53]

However, as Simmons notes, the role of setting a goal for policy-making and non-ideal theory becomes more important the closer you approach justice.[54] As another example relating to current politics, universal healthcare seems obviously more just than not having healthcare. Yet, it is still disputed in the United States, partially because it has become a part of the two larger Democrat and Republican narratives. One would be hard-pressed to find a debate on the subject that does not eventually invoke broader ideas about ideally just conditions. Underlying philosophical convictions that rest on ideal theories that the politicians may not even have directly read have become so entrenched in the political debate that it is difficult to imagine it without them.

In fact, there are a lot of smaller topics debated in politics that cannot even be understood without placing them in the wider ideological debate about just social conditions, such as the debate between the current independent school structures vs. fully regulated

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[51] Robeyns, 'Ideal Theory in Theory and Practice'.
[52] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice (Revised).*, 8; Sen, 'What Do We Want from a Theory of Justice?'
[53] Sen, 'What Do We Want from a Theory of Justice?'
[54] Simmons, 'Ideal and Nonideal Theory'.

nation-wide schooling in the Netherlands for instance. Approaching this debate from either side without referring to liberal democratic values such as equality and freedom, which are taken directly from Rawlsian ideal theory, simply would not allow it to make any sense. In this way, it is nearly impossible to imagine ideal theory not having an agenda-setting role in politics. It also seems improbable that non-ideal theory could come to fulfill this role, precisely because its nuance about specific existing facts makes it less useful to determine a long-term vision for policy.

IV.III Righting wrongs

I would point to another positive contribution that future ideal theory research can have that acts as a subcategory of the inspirational role.

As pointed out by (2) and (3) much too little attention has been devoted to oppressed groups in theorising about justice. In addition, much too little theorising about justice is done by these groups, because of their underrepresentation in philosophy, an effect of their oppression. This leaves their voices unable to have their needs heard and in turn their needs are not met. This has been and still is the case for women, people of colour and nearly all other oppressed groups.

As discussed in the section on idealization, this has been partially caused by idealization-as-idealizing on the subject of interpersonal differences and institutionalised oppression and partially by the negligence of existing ideal theories regarding their own limitations.

As noted here, there are political issues in which ideal theory is currently deeply entrenched as part of political debates by providing the underlying goals for either side. Some non-ideal theorists would likely not applaud this state of affairs, but it exists nonetheless.

Doing away with ideal theory now would be a missed opportunity, as it would not allow future ideal theories to mitigate the failures of existing ones. Keeping the debate surrounding ideal justice going can make up some of the deficit that minorities have in being themselves represented in the ideal theory that does serve this value of being a goal for politics. In addition, it would allow minorities to themselves put forth ideal theories that contain their vision on these long-discussed issues, which has always been neglected. Perhaps this would result in fundamentally different theories providing the goal for politics.

Currently existing contributions by gender and race justice theorists expose how partial (as opposed to comprehensive, not biased) the influential works of Rawls and Dworkin were on those issues and how necessary the continuation of ideal theorising could

be. They have made a start on righting the wrongs of their underrepresentation in ideal theory.[55]

Ideal theory will continue to hold an inspirational role in politics and providing a less partial and more representative inspiration could make real impact through indirect action guidance towards justice.

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[55] Some works that were consulted for this work that were done by such theorists include: O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue*; Watson, 'Toward a Feminist Theory of Justice'; Shelby, 'Justice, Deviance, and the Dark Ghetto'; Anderson, 'Toward a Non-Ideal, Relational Methodology for Political Philosophy'; Schwartzman, *Challenging Liberalism*; Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs*; MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*; Khader, 'Transnational Feminisms, Nonideal Theory, and "Other" Women's Power'; Jaggar, *Gender and Global Justice*; Robeyns, 'Sen's Capability Approach and Gender Inequality'; Robeyns, 'When Will Society Be Gender Just?'; Stemplowska and Swift, 'Ideal and Nonideal Theory'.

V. Positive role 2: Ideal theory as an instrument of evaluation

There is a second positive role that is partially derived from the first, one that is also more hotly debated and contentious in its worth. It hinges on the success of the first, because it uses the role of ideal theory as a goal by translating ideal theory as the goal into ideal theory as a benchmark for perfect justice. Through acting as the goal for politics, ideal theory also acts as a benchmark for justice in making decisions. This allows it to potentially serve as an evaluative measure for action design and implementation. Some take this to mean that ideal theory should provide a comprehensive and precise framework for comparison. Throughout my argument in this section, it will become clear why I agree with objectors that this would be infeasible. Nonetheless, there is an evaluative role left for ideal theory, when policy is evaluated over time.

One way in which this could work is precisely the way that Sen objects to with his mountain example. If a political decision is seen as equivalent to the comparison of the two mountains Kanchenjunga and Mont Blanc, Sen would say it is unnecessary to know ideal justice to deduce which of two political options is preferable in terms of justice.[56] There are, however, three problems with this equivalence. First, the way one might deduce which mountain is taller depends on perception or on knowledge of their relative values according to a system with a clear metric, such as their height in metres, and these values are compared. Justice has no such metric. Second, the height of a mountain can be determined along one single metric, whereas justice is determined by means of several different elements working together. Third, action design and implementation of a political decision that tries to make an improvement on justice works over time, whereas the height of mountains is measured at one moment in time. This means that initial situation A exists at time t and two options B and C pose changes to A and are compared for their effect over time at times $t+1$, $t+2$ etc. Each of these differences with the mountain example has implications for the dynamic between ideal theory, non-ideal theory and action design. Put together, they make ideal theory one possibility for evaluating measures concerning justice.

V.I The metric for justice

First, a comparison of Kanchenjunga and Mont Blanc can go one of two ways, it is either based on intuitive perception, which is difficult to imagine as there is a continent between them, or it is based on the more likely option: a comparison of their values in a

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[56] Sen, *The Idea of Justice*.

metric. The most commonly used metric world-wide to do this is metres above sea-level and as the peak of Mont Blanc is under the 5000 metres mark and Kanchenjunga stands at over 8000 metres, the comparison is fairly straightforward.[57] Another way of comparing would be in feet, miles, kilometres or any other measure of distance. In each Kanchenjunga wins by the same relative margin. The case of measuring relative justice of two options is different, as no metric that is as straightforward exists. This is not a problem for cases that are as far apart in justice, slavery vs. not having slavery for instance. Mere intuition suffices to come to the conclusion that the former is more just. When the cases are closer together, however, intuitions become less clear and less universal and reference to a metric becomes more essential. Comparing Kanchenjunga and Mont Blanc is perhaps possible for experienced mountain-climbers without even referring to their height in metres. Kanchenjunga is the 3rd highest mountain in the world and 78% taller than Mont Blanc, a clear enough difference. Comparing Kanchenjunga with K2 is much more difficult without referring to their height in a metric, as K2 is around 0.2% taller. As the two are so close together in height and one is in Nepal and the other in Pakistan making comparison by perception impossible, mere intuition without a metric would almost be a coin flip decision. When you know that K2 is 8611m and Kanchenjunga is 8586m, however, you would be absolutely sure.[58] The value of a metric for decisions between options that are so close together can thus improve evaluation of that decision immensely. The question in the case of justice then becomes: what could that metric be? Any metric requires a benchmark, something to evaluate as the 0-value. For Celsius it is the freezing temperature of water and for metres it is sea-level. For justice, this is much more difficult, as it is unclear what the 0-value of the metric could be.

Simmons puts forth the idea that relative distance from the ideal of justice presented by ideal theory could be the 0-value for evaluating justice.[59] This would be a different interpretation of ideal theory as the goal: ideal theory as the benchmark for justice. It could be measurable if a political decision improves justice by looking at the relative distance to the ideal of the differing options. However, this use of ideal theory as an evaluative benchmark is not unproblematic, as I'll now demonstrate.

[57] Carter, 'Classification of the Himalaya'; Tsianos et al., 'Factors Affecting a Climber's Ability to Ascend Mont Blanc'.
[58] Yao et al., 'Third Pole Environment (TPE)'.
[59] Simmons, 'Ideal and Nonideal Theory'.

V.II Multi-value comparison

The next difference between Sen's mountain example and improvements on justice ties into an objection and makes using ideal theory as a benchmark more difficult. It concerns the fact that the measurement of mountains can be done according to only one value, height. A lot of the critique surrounding Simmons' claim is that this is not the case for justice, for real questions about justice are interdisciplinary in implementation and implication.[60] Establishing a metric with ideal theory as the benchmark to evaluate justice would thus involve working with a set of values of justice that all need to be involved in one larger framework that categorises them each in such a way that they can be measured. Additionally, there needs to be some kind of ranking between the metrics so that if there are two options, where A promotes one value p and works adversely for another value q and where B promotes q and reduces p, some conclusion can be drawn about the relative value of the values. Establishing such a framework relative to ideal justice is not only extremely difficult, it also seems near impossible to have all philosophers and subsequently humanity agree on one such framework. Therefore, the positive value added by using ideal theory as an evaluative benchmark is endangered greatly by this aspect of decisions involving justice. The objection that might follow from these problems is that using ideal theory as an evaluative measure cannot feasibly work. This reminds of objection (1), which used ideal theory's lack of concern for feasibility to challenge its lack of capability to be action guiding.[61] The complexity and lack of feasibility means that Simmons' suggestion of ideal theory as the benchmark by which to measure justice will probably never work comprehensively.

V.III Evaluating over time

Nonetheless, the third difference with the mountain example shows a way in which ideal theory could still fulfill this positive role. This aspect of difference is that measuring mountains happens at a moment in time, whereas justice is measured over time. With justice, the effects of a measure are not only relevant at time t, evaluation remains important at times $t+1$, $t+2$, etc. This changes the use of ideal theory as an evaluative measure from a 0-value in a defined metric to an extension of its role as the goal for politics. When evaluation is done at a moment instead of over time, precision is the most important factor of evaluation. The complexity of creating a working and agreed upon framework makes this difficult. When

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[60] Simmons; Sen, 'What Do We Want from a Theory of Justice?'; Sen, *The Idea of Justice*; Valentini, 'Ideal vs. Non-Ideal Theory'.
[61] Southwood, 'Does "Ought" Imply "Feasible"?'; Stemplowska, 'What's Ideal About Ideal Theory?'

evaluation is done over time, however, the trajectory of the process of improving justice becomes a second important factor to evaluate the success of a matter. The intuition here is that option A might be preferable in the short term, but option B could be closer to justice in the long run.

An example that could elucidate this intuition is Reagan's trickle down economics. This policy that decreased tax on businesses was used to great effect in the 1980s by the administration of Ronald Reagan. In the years of his administration US economic growth was at percentages that have not been repeated as consistently since by any president. The idea was that the increased wealth in the rich few in America would trickle down through the success of their companies by creating more jobs for the poor. And in the 1980s, this seemed to work. Therefore, he is hailed as one of the greatest presidents of all time by many Americans and considered a national hero. It seems obvious then, that this policy promoted justice. However, it became clear after Reagan's two terms that as the business environment changed, the money stopped trickling down to reach the poorest in society.[62] As wealth inequality increased, rich Americans found ways to make money without running the risk of reinvesting it into competitive markets. Companies like Amazon, Google, Apple and Uber have monopolised their markets. Lack of competition means that they don't have to operate as businesses during Reagan's time. The legacy of near-zero taxes for these businesses that was left by '*Reaganomics*', however, has made it possible for Jeff Bezos to earn a reported figure close to 9 million dollars per hour, while his Amazon workers are paid $15 an hour.[63]

During Reagan's time then, the decision was made to cut certain taxes on the assumption that the growth to businesses that resulted from it would make up for the revenue made from taxes for the government while Americans were better off. This was initially effective in the 1980s and therein made an improvement on justice in the short-term, as greater wealth was shared around and the lives of average American people were improved. In the long run, however, this contributed to greater wealth inequality. Most would agree that wealth inequality is less just than wealth equality, thus the policy had adverse long-term effects in terms of reaching ideal justice.[64]

Thus the importance of measuring justice over time becomes clear. Here, ideal theory can perform an evaluative role through demonstrating whether a decision will merely

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[62] Lyttleton, 'Understanding the Legacy of "Trickle-Down Economics"'; 'U.S. GDP Growth Rate 1961-2021 as per World Bank'.
[63] Hoffower, 'We Did the Math to Calculate How Much Money Jeff Bezos Makes in a Year, Month, Week, Day, Hour, Minute, and Second'.
[64] Horowitz, Igielnik, and Kochhar, 'Trends in U.S. Income and Wealth Inequality'.

improve justice in the short-term or whether it will also establish or continue a long-term trend towards justice. It can fulfill this role by virtue of its other role as the goal for politics. Because ideal theory gets invoked in debates as the goal for political decisions to work towards, it fulfills the role of benchmark much more implicitly through evaluating whether action design will work towards reaching the goal set by ideal theory over time. Importantly, the demands of precision that are posed on evaluation of a multi-value decision in one moment in time are not as damaging to this version of evaluation over time. This is because in predicting the future it is much harder to be precise even in commonly more measurable scientific comparisons, especially over a large period of time.

For instance, the most-watched athletics event in the world, the 100m sprint, records times with dazzling precision, to the thousandth of a second if needed. In that sport, it became generally agreed by biomechanists working with huge data sets and the best equipment that sprinters were approaching the fastest possible time in that event when Asafa Powell ran a 9.74 second 100m in 2007 and that that record would hold for a long time. Einmahl and Magnus thought the best time possible was still a little faster though, they concluded that the most probable end-point for the 100m world record would be 9.29 with a standard margin of error of 0.39.[65] Indeed, within two years Usain Bolt would set the record at 9.58 seconds, a full tenth of a second faster than any other person has ever ran the race. Tyson Gay and Yohan Blake both registered a 9.69. Now, probabilistic mathematical models guess that Bolt's world record could stand for the next two centuries.[66] However, as Bolt's sudden defiance of all existing models before his emergence showed, we just can't know. When it comes to predicting the future, we can only hope to guess something close to the truth, but we can never be sure of it.

The precision of a measurement of justice over time will similarly always be characterised by a certain amount of doubt. This means that the lack of precision that ideal theory can offer is at least somewhat less damaging for a measurement over time.

V.IV One step forward, no steps back

By knowing what the goal is that we are working towards, we can eliminate at least one kind of problem: taking one step toward justice followed by two steps back. Keeping ideal theory in mind can prevent succumbing to this problem as it promotes focusing on the

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[65] Einmahl and Magnus, 'Records in Athletics Through Extreme-Value Theory'; Gonzalez, 'What's the Fastest 100 Meter Dash a Human Can Run?'
[66] Sumpter, 'When Will Bolt's Record Be Beaten?'

long-term trend, rather than quick-fix improvements. Now, I'll consider an example where ideal theory provided less precision and nonetheless made a positive impact on trending towards justice over time: sustainable development theory. The field of providing aid was focused on fixing practical problems for centuries. In the aftermath of major humanitarian crises, however, it has become more clear over time that making long-term sustainable improvements to infrastructure is just as important, if not more. This change of perspective to having a long-term goal in mind, is leading to a lot more theorising about prioritising certain kinds of aid over others. This is helpful in order to establish a trend of improvement over time, so that the same issues do not have to be faced over and over without end. Developing theories that keep the goal of sustainability in mind have thus gained an increased role of importance in the field.[67]

This example shows a second role through which ideal theory can still make a positive contribution to the field of justice theory. This role is closely tied to the first, but not identical to it. Here, ideal theory not only acts as a conceptual goal but as a framework through which policy can be evaluated. It seems implausible that one overriding ideal theory will be agreed upon in the near future and that that ideal theory could provide a framework that has a detailed enough ranking of values to make that evaluation precise enough to entirely base a decision upon. However, ideal theory can be used to evaluate whether a policy will help a society trend towards justice in the long term. If it is taken into account, ideal theory can thus be used to avoid policies that make short-term improvements but which are long-term liabilities in our approach to justice.

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[67] Eriksen et al., 'Adaptation Interventions and Their Effect on Vulnerability in Developing Countries'; Adger and Kelly, 'Social Vulnerability to Climate Change and the Architecture of Entitlements'.

VI. Minimising the impact of objections (1) - (4) while maximising positive roles 1 & 2

Still, some objectors might say that when ideal theory takes a different approach to Cohen, and does want to address objections (1) - (4), it is so affected by these objections that it has a net negative contribution for the field of justice theory. This objection is quite serious, as its success would defeat my argument. However, there are two ways in which ideal theorists can deal with this argument.[68]

The first is not very promising, as it relies on the argument that ideal theory will always be referred to in politics and it will therefore be impossible to do away with it. According to this line of argument, non-ideal objectors would just have to face the music that ideal theory will always be a thorn in their side, distracting from the work they are doing while making a net negative contribution to that work. This is not very promising as it leans into the idea that ideal theory is worthless, less than worthless even.

The second and far more promising way to deal with this objection, is to take the objections more seriously and to try to minimize their effects. The two positive roles ideal theory continues to fulfill in theorising about justice leave it a more modest role than it once had, but they do present positive aspects to it. The job of the ideal theorist then becomes to reduce the effects of the negative aspects of ideal theory, while maximally contributing positively. The following recommendations could help achieve this: A) ideal theories should be more conscious of their own limitations and incorporate them clearly into the theory, B) through its limitations, ideal theories should note how they interact with (future) non-ideal theory to best perform their positive roles, C) bad idealization should be avoided, and D) uses of other forms of idealization should be mentioned and explained.

Robeyns' list of capabilities for gender inequality is a good example for each of these four recommendations.[69] First, she clearly defines her ideal theory to be partial in two senses. One the one hand it is partial insofar as it is putting forth capabilities that are minimally necessary for gender equality, meaning that this list could not be comprehensive for actually achieving gender justice, as there could be circumstances that fall outside of it that are preventing that from happening even if the full list is realised. On the other hand this particular ideal theory is partial because of its scope only applying to gender justice. Second, this theory is specific about ways in which it might change when translated into non-ideal theory. When feasibility is accounted for in a non-ideal version of this list, changing

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[68] Stemplowska and Swift, 'Ideal and Nonideal Theory'; Stemplowska, 'What's Ideal About Ideal Theory?'; Cohen, 'Facts and Principles'.

[69] Robeyns, 'Sen's Capability Approach and Gender Inequality'.

feasibility constraints that emerge from real life would change the content of the list over time, making it important to also work at the ideal level. Third, Robeyns notes areas in which bad idealizations have historically been made in other ideal theories, one of these is abstracting away from care. Idealizing away from care is impossible because illness and disability will always exist, even in an ideally just society. Furthermore, this abstraction disadvantages women, who overwhelmingly are the ones providing care. Therefore, care needs to be accounted for in an ideal theory concerned with gender inequality. Fourth, the level of abstraction used in this ideal theory is generally low, but where abstracting claims are made, they are supported with substantial evidence. The claim that women have better social networks than men is one example where a generalising abstraction is made from individual data, but the claim is supported with the relevant research. This means the theory keeps the idealizations it uses grounded through limiting and supporting them.[70]

Through following the recommendations, Robeyns' ideal theory thereby limits the damage done to it by all of the objections (1) - (4). She establishes reasons for not being directly action guiding, while remaining indirectly action guiding, making it possible for both positive roles to be performed by her theory. This indirect action guidance somewhat limits the effects of objection (1). Objections (2) and (3) are also not as damaging as for other theories, because bad idealization is not done and other idealization is kept to a minimum and explained. Objection (4) is less harmful because Robeyns explicitly leaves room for non-ideal theory and notes how and where it could translate her ideal theory into action guidance. Through this method, her theory makes a maximally useful contribution to the debate, which I would argue is net positive. It limits the damage of objections, while maximally making use of the two positive roles of operating as a goal and an evaluative benchmark in addition to being research that pursues truth.

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[70] Robeyns; Robeyns, 'Ideal Theory in Theory and Practice'.

VII. Conclusion

I conclude that there remains a positive role for ideal theory in the field of theorising about justice, regardless of the validity of the four major objections raised against it, which I have all granted to be valid throughout this thesis. In the early parts of this work, I have provided context for each of the four major objections, which are: (1) disregard for action guidance, (2) disregard for interpersonal differences, (3) disregard for institutionalised oppression, (4) distraction from non-ideal theory. In the preceding decades, these objections have emerged because of some of the shortcomings of ideal theory. These shortcomings are so damaging according to some, that they consider ideal theory to be worthless or even damaging. The conclusion these theorists draw is that we should do away with ideal theory altogether in theorising about justice. This thesis has challenged that claim from the starting point of embracing the objections to see what ideal theory could minimally contribute. This was done through a discussion of Cohen, whose fact-insensitive theory is not supposed to be action guiding whatsoever. Its contributing aspect is truth, however. Examining the elusive value of truth requires a very different type of philosophical work and this meant that it would be necessary to look for further added value provided by ideal theory.

The argument was then made that the first of the roles that provide that positive value is ideal theory as the goal for politics. This role contributes to political debates, by providing context for specific issues and points of ideological debate for larger issues. It is also unimaginable that ideal theory would not fulfill this role, as the goal provided by respective ideal theories also provide arguments for implementing certain policies. The second positive role that ideal theory retains is that of long-term evaluation of policies. By having ideal theory perform this role, it can be avoided that policies take one step towards justice before leading to two steps backwards. Quick fixes are often popular and it is therefore necessary to check whether they lead to justice in the long run. This role is limited, however, because ideal theorists cannot hope to close the gap between them and action design completely, as the complexity of doing so is infeasible. Therefore, ideal theory cannot be used to precisely evaluate the outcomes of policies in terms of justice, it can merely point to their beneficial or adverse outcomes over a longer trend towards justice. Nonetheless, these roles provide two ways in which ideal theory continues to be valuable and necessary in theorising about justice. Ideal theory is the only way in which these two roles can be fulfilled. Therein, its value is much larger than it is often given credit for.

Thus, several arguments have been presented that defend ideal theory. However, in nuancing these arguments, some points of critique have come to the forefront as well. Bad

idealizations are perhaps the most damaging underlying element in a theory; they damage the contribution that any ideal theory that employs them can make. Second, the historical prevalence of ideal theory might have been the cause of the lack of consciousness about the limitations of ideal theory, which exacerbates the damage objections (1) and (4) do to these theories.

To maximally utilise the positive outcome, it is also necessary that the negative effects of the objections (1) - (4) are limited, which is what the last section of the thesis was devoted to. There, four recommendations were issued to accomplish that end: A) ideal theories should be more conscious of their own limitations and incorporate them clearly into the theory, B) through its limitations, ideal theories should note how they interact with (future) non-ideal theory to best perform their positive roles, C) bad idealization should be avoided, and D) uses of other forms of idealization should be mentioned and explained. Robeyns' list of capabilities to evaluate gender inequality was used as an example that complied with each of these recommendations. In doing so, her work makes a maximally net positive contribution to the debate.

Hopefully, ideal theory will continue according to her example and will not repeat the mistakes of the past. With that in mind, I would point to the necessity of continuing to do ideal theory in order to allow for underrepresented minority theorists to make their alterations and contributions to the field. This has already been occurring with the increased exposure of the works of certain theorists belonging to minorities in the 21st century. However, the gap is still large and there is still much work to be done before it is closed. In the meantime, ideal theory is providing the goal for politics and a way to evaluate policy. In my view, this warrants looking upon it a little more favourably than the field of justice theory currently does.

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