Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy
VOL. 30, NO. 1 · MARCH 2025
https://doi.org/10.26556/jesp.v30i1.4305

NONIDEAL THEORY AS IDEOLOGY

Jordan David Thomas Walters

> The idea of political philosophy as reconciliation must be invoked with care. For political philosophy is always in danger of being used corruptly as a defense of an unjust and unworthy status quo, and thus of being ideological in Marx's sense. From time to time we must ask whether justice as fairness, or any other view, is ideological in this way; and if not, why not? Are the very basic ideas it uses ideological? How can we show they are not?
>
> —John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*

UNTIL the recent nonideal theory turn in political philosophy, the following two propositions were relatively uncontroversial: (1) "The reason for beginning with ideal theory is that it provides … the only basis for the systematic grasp of these more pressing problems [i.e., structural domination, exploitation, coercion, and oppression]"; and (2) "[Until] the ideal is identified, at least in outline … nonideal theory lacks an objective, an aim, by reference to which its queries can be answered."[1] Yet shortly after their rapid ascent to common knowledge, these two dogmas of Rawlsian political philosophy came under fire.

Critics who reject these two dogmas often take themselves to be rejecting a particular way of *doing* political philosophy, a way that emphasizes figuring out what justice requires under conditions of full compliance, only then to consider issues of implementation in conditions of partial compliance. These critics contend that this assumption, which forms the bedrock of so-called ideal theory, veils a more pernicious political agenda, one that is antithetical to the proper goal of political philosophy as an enterprise.[2] As Charles Mills puts it,

1 The first statement is from Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 9; the second is from Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*, 90.

2 For a general overview of the ideal/nonideal theory debate, see Valentini, "Ideal vs. Nonideal Theory," 655–62. See also Rossi and Sleat, "Realism in Normative Political Theory." As Rossi and Sleat note, there may be significant overlap between political realism and nonideal theory, but the two concepts are nevertheless distinct. Finally, for a more recent criticism of the bright-line distinction between ideal and nonideal theory, see Levy, "There Is No Such Thing as Ideal Theory."

the problem with ideal theory is that it is the result of a "distortional complex of ideals, values, norms, and beliefs that reflects the nonrepresentative interests and experiences of a small minority of the national population—middle-to-upper-class white males—who are hugely over-represented in the professional philosophical population."[3] The safe haven for contemporary political philosophers, we are told, is in nonideal theory, for it allows us to see what ideal theory obscures: structural domination, exploitation, coercion, and oppression. But this now familiar narrative should strike us as strange, for even if we grant that ideal theory is a form of ideology, we have not yet stopped to ask ourselves: Is nonideal theory itself a form of ideology?

The goal of this paper is to examine this question. My thesis is that for all its merits, nonideal theory is neither innocent nor insulated from ideology critique.[4] More precisely, I will argue that nonideal theory is ideological in virtue of the fact that it rules out more radical utopian ways of theorizing by methodological fiat. But the goal of this paper is not to pit ideal theory against nonideal theory, for I agree that ideal theory is just as ideological as its nonideal counterpart. Instead, my goal is to argue for a deflationary resolution to the ideal/nonideal theory debate. I aim to do so by asking what it says about ourselves that we are having a debate about whether we should be ideal/nonideal theorists. I offer a pessimistic answer, which says that the debate between ideal/nonideal theory is itself a form of ideology, one that serves to reinforce the status quo by convincing political philosophers/theorists that the most pressing problems are problems about what we should think about what we are doing. But this is false. It follows that we ought to abandon the debate and address the pressing problems of political philosophy head on, in pluralist fashion, oscillating back and forth between these two modes of theorizing without a decision procedure to tell us when we should take up one perspective or the other.

1. PRELIMINARIES

Let us take a moment to define the terms of the debate. It is not my goal in this section to offer up a real as opposed to a nominal definition of *ideology critique*. Nor is it my goal to definitively settle the conditions that demarcate an ideal theory from a nonideal theory. This is not the place to settle these in-house disputes. What I can do, however, is prevent linguistic disputes from arising

3 Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," 172.

4 I am not the first to raise this worry. Most recently, see, e.g., Adams, "An Ideology Critique of Nonideal Methodology." I am largely sympathetic to the overall efficacy of his critique. As such, in section 3, I aim to offer my ideology critique of nonideal theory at the level of principles, which are, I take it, still within the spirit of his critique.

by outlining precisely what I mean when I use these terms. I aim to use these terms in a general and schematic manner so that the fine-grained details can be filled in as the reader pleases.

1.1. Ideal Theory and Nonideal Theory

Following Laura Valentini, I say that a political philosophy/theory counts as an *ideal theory* just in case it satisfies at least one of the following three requirements.[5]

> *Full Compliance Requirement*: "(i) All relevant agents comply with the demands of justice applying to them; and (ii) natural and historical conditions are favourable—i.e., society is sufficiently economically and socially developed to realize justice."[6]
>
> *Utopian Requirement*: "Feasibility constraints play little to no role in theory construction: the point of the theory is to tell us what to think, not what to do."[7]
>
> *End-State Requirement*: Theory construction ought to aim at a "long-term goal for institutional reform."[8]

Following Valentini again, I say that a political philosophy/theory counts as *nonideal theory* just in case it satisfies at least one of the following three requirements.[9]

5 I add the qualifier "one of" to note that there are in-house disputes about which requirements are necessary conditions for making a theory an ideal theory. Cf. Rossi and Sleat, "Realism in Normative Political Theory," 690. One more qualifier: to make things streamlined, let us say that if someone endorses, say, the full compliance requirement, they cannot also endorse the partial compliance requirement on pains of practical inconsistency. I leave open the possibility that some may not prefer to box themselves in and so may prefer to mix and match principles, e.g., endorsing the full compliance requirement and the transitional requirement, but this, by my lights, does not count as ideal or nonideal theory but some hybrid variant thereof. I will defend a view broadly sympathetic to (temporal) mixing and matching in section 5.

6 Valentini, "Ideal vs. Non-ideal Theory," 655. The first is derived from Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 8. The second condition is derived from Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*, 4–6.

7 Valentini, "Ideal vs. Non-ideal Theory," 657. Influential representatives include but are not limited to Cohen, *Rescuing Justice from Equality*; Simmons, "Ideal and Nonideal Theory"; and Estlund, *Utopophobia*.

8 Valentini, "Ideal vs. Non-ideal Theory," 660. Valentini cites Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*; Simmons, "Ideal and Nonideal Theory"; and Gilabert, "Comparative Assessments of Justice, Political Feasibility, and Ideal Theory."

9 *Mutatis mutandis*, see note 5 above.

Partial Compliance Requirement: Not everyone (i) fully "complies with the demands of justice," and the (ii) "natural and historical conditions" are unfavorable.[10]

Realistic Requirement: Feasibility constraints play a large role in theory construction: the point of the theory is to tell us what to do, not merely what to think.[11]

Transitional Requirement: Theory construction ought to proceed in piecemeal fashion, identifying near-term goals that are actually achievable.[12]

1.2. Ideology

Following Charles Mills, I define *ideology* as a "distortional complex of ideals, values, norms, and beliefs that reflects the nonrepresentative interests and experiences of a small minority of the national population."[13] Accordingly, to launch an *ideology critique* against some *X* is to provide both a reason to reject the truth of *X* and to provide an account of *how X* functions to reinforce relationships of domination/exploitation/coercion/oppression.[14]

Because ideology critique plays both an epistemic and an explanatory role, it ought to be distinguished from so-called debunking arguments, which play only an epistemic role.[15] In brief, debunking arguments consist of a causal premise and an epistemic premise. The causal premise identifies what causes *S* to believe *p* (e.g., underlying psychological features). The epistemic premise asserts that the causal premise is an epistemic defeater for *p*. (For example, those underlying psychological features do not appropriately track the truth.) Accordingly, the conclusion of a debunking argument is that *S*'s belief that *p* is unjustified.[16]

10 Valentini, "Ideal vs. Non-ideal Theory," 655.

11 Valentini, "Ideal vs. Non-ideal Theory," 657.

12 Valentini, "Ideal vs. Non-ideal Theory," 660. For recent discussion, see, e.g., Wiens, "Prescribing Institutions Without Ideal Theory" and "Against Ideal Guidance"; and Barrett, "Deviating from the Ideal."

13 Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," 172.

14 Cf. Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*.

15 Unfortunately, these two types of critique are sometimes run together. See, e.g., Amia Srinivasan's criticism of Jason Stanley's definition of ideological beliefs: "Now, on Stanley's notion of ideological belief, any belief that is resistant to counter-evidence—any belief that lies near the centre of one's doxastic web—counts as ideology. But that rules in too many items of knowledge as ideology: my belief that I have hands, that 2 + 2 = 4, that my mother loves me, all count as ideology on Stanley's schema" ("Philosophy and Ideology," 374). What is therefore required, if the term "ideology" is to be extensionally adequate, is a functional counterpart to the epistemic deficiency.

16 I borrow this general structure from Kahane, "Evolutionary Debunking Arguments."

Debunking arguments are ubiquitous, for all they require is that the debunker tell a story about how *S*'s belief that *p* is improperly based. But to launch an ideology critique against some *X* (e.g., the naturalness of the male/female gender binary) is to provide both a reason to reject the truth of *X and* an account of how *X* functions so as to reinforce relationships of domination. As Tommie Shelby puts it, "A form of social consciousness is an ideology if and only if (i) its discursive content is epistemically defective, that is, distorted by illusions; (ii) through these illusions it functions to establish or reinforce social relations of oppression; and (iii) its wide acceptance can be (largely) explained by the class-structured false consciousness of most who embrace it."[17]

When we make an ideology critique against some *X* (e.g., ideal theory), what is the critique *about*? Two answers present themselves. On the cognitivist view, we might think that the target of ideology critique is the false *beliefs* of individuals, which function to reinforce/establish relationships of domination. Yet the cognitivist view seems to pass the explanatory buck, for it assumes that the skull is the holding cell for ideology. But to many philosophers, ideology seems to be just as much a matter of praxis as of belief. Indeed, as Sally Haslanger writes:

> On the cognitivist account it remains the individual's thinking or reasoning that is in error, not the very tools that our language and culture provide us in order to think. But what we absorb through socialization is not just a set of beliefs, but a language, a set of concepts, a responsiveness to particular features of things (and not others), a set of social meanings. The cognitivist emphasis on shared beliefs and patterns of reasoning is too limited to accommodate all this.[18]

Adopting Haslanger's pluralist view allows us to see ideology at work in more ordinary contexts. For instance, suppose a committee has finalized its plans to build a subway. Suppose further that none of the members of the committee have any explicitly held prejudicial beliefs against persons with mobility issues. As it turns out, the subway is widely regarded as a great success, and the committee is praised for their careful and detail-oriented planning. "But detail-oriented for whom?" we might ask, which then prompts the ideology critique. The fact that the committee failed to include an elevator in the subway plans reveals something about what they took to be the social meaning of public transportation: a means of transporting people *like them.* Thus, even though

17 Shelby, "Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory," 183–84.

18 Haslanger, "Racism, Ideology, and Social Movements," 9. See also Haslanger, "Political Epistemology and Social Critique."

nobody on the committee held any explicit ableist beliefs, their actions (and omissions) played a functional role of reinforcing exclusionary ableist norms.

In what follows, I will use *ideology* and *ideology critique* in Haslanger's pluralist sense, yet I will retain the general features of Shelby's definition. One reason for doing so is that it allows us to critique not only the particular beliefs of ideal/nonideal theorists but also the functional role that the practice of theorizing in such-and-such a way plays in society.

2. IDEAL THEORY AS IDEOLOGY

Let us now turn to Mills's ideology critique of ideal theory. For Mills, the orthodox orientation into political theorizing begins with the assumption that we should be doing ideal theory. According to Mills, ideal theorists begin by asking the right question: "What is justice?" Where ideal theorists go wrong, Mills tells us in "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," is that they then proceed to make a series of idealizations in order to answer that question.[19]

First, they start with an idealized social ontology—that is, the assumption that we are all, deep down, moral equals and that "structural domination, exploitation, coercion, and oppression" are deviations from this natural equality. They then build in idealized cognitive capacities. They then idealize away all oppression. Historical oppression, though it may exist in the past, is nonexistent in their thought experiments. Theorizing about reparations is not necessarily ruled out, but if anyone does discuss it, the discussion will be "vague and promissory." Next, they idealize social institutions. The family, economic structure, and legal system are assumed to operate according to yet another idealized model. This rules out patriarchal domination and oppression in the family structure, domination by the market, and discriminatory practices by judges and law enforcement officials (169). Though this may sound strange, recall that for ideal theorists, we ought to fix our ideals first before we deal with these real-world concerns, pressing as they may be. The next step for an ideal theorist is to idealize the cognitive sphere: the typical person in an ideal theorist's thought experiment faces no "cognitive obstacles" and suffers from neither akrasia nor deluded self-interest. As a last step, ideal theorists idealize compliance. That is, they assume, along with Rawls, that there is strict compliance with the principles of justice regulating a well-ordered society (169).

Having isolated the six characteristics of ideal theorizing, Mills then asks us to "perform the operation of Brechtian defamiliarization" and ask ourselves: "*How in God's name could anyone think that this is the appropriate way to do ethics?*"

19 Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," 168 (hereafter cited parenthetically).

(169). Although mainstream political philosophers may balk when presented with this question, Mills goes on to explain why the question is intelligible and worthy of consideration. He writes:

> If we start from what is presumably the uncontroversial premise that the ultimate point of ethics is to guide our actions and make ourselves better people and the world a better place, then the framework above will not only be unhelpful, but will in certain respects be deeply antithetical to the proper goal of theoretical ethics as an enterprise. (170)

Expanding on this point, we might say that according to Mills's ideology critique, when ideal theorists endorse the full compliance requirement, this leads them to systematically ignore issues of partial compliance, for example, facts about gender and racial subordination. Herein lies the epistemic horn of the ideology critique: these issues are salient injustices; thus, a theory is epistemically deficient insofar as it fails to account for them. The functional horn of the ideology critique naturally follows: the best explanation for why ideal theorists utilize the full compliance requirement is that it allows them to endlessly defer these issues.[20] Thus, for Mills, both the principles of ideal theory and the practices of ideal theorizers function to obscure the importance of such issues (179). The proper way to highlight and theorize about such issues is to start doing nonideal theory. Put otherwise, we ought to ditch the full compliance requirement for the partial compliance requirement when theorizing about justice. This is because the partial compliance requirement avoids both the epistemic and functional horns of ideology critique. That is, it does not idealize away oppression to the benefit of non-oppressed persons; and in so doing, a nonideal theory of justice has the potential to actually illuminate—rather than obscure—these pressing matters.

Of course, some ideal theorists will claim that they do not assume the full compliance requirement. Instead, they might characterize their view, for example, as one that endorses the end-state requirement. Yet this move does not escape Mills's critique, for Mills can run a similar gambit on the end-state requirement, claiming that it too leads to epistemic distortions that function to reinforce relations of domination. Perhaps no book better exemplifies the

20 As Mills notes, not only is this issue a problem for Rawls himself, it is a problem for his followers. Mills writes: "In a 1999 five-volume collection of eighty-eight essays from three decades of writing on Rawls . . . , only one of the included essays deals with race, that being an article by the African-American philosopher Laurence Thomas. . . . What does this say about the evasions of ideal theory? Is it that the United States has long since achieved racial justice, so there is no need to theorize it?" ("'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," 179).

end-state requirement than Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*.[21] But Mills contends that the book, though almost half a century old, has failed to incite a discussion about reparations for Native Americans and Black Americans—and this is despite the fact that, for Nozick, "the principle of rectification is explicitly demarcated as one of the three basic principles of justice" (180).[22]

"Whence this silence?" Mills asks (180). An inference to the best explanation takes us to the functional horn of the ideology critique: the reason why ideal theorists utilize the end-state requirement is that it allows them to bypass theorizing about how we might think about justice in the real world, as opposed to a hypothetical world where free and equal persons engage in just original acquisitions of property. The epistemic horn of the ideology critique naturally follows. It is a truism that there are salient injustices related to unjust transfer and acquisition of property; thus, a theory is epistemically deficient insofar as it fails to account for such facts. But the end-state requirement leads us to theorize in such a way that excludes these facts, thereby making it an instance of ideology. The proper way to theorize about rectificatory justice, Mills might say, is to ditch the end-state requirement for the transitional requirement. This is because the transitional requirement evades both the epistemic and the functional horns of ideology critique; it takes the issue of how to achieve rectificatory justice head on, as opposed to marginalizing the issue to an endnote, as Nozick does (181).

Mills concludes that not only is ideal theory not useful; it is pernicious and antithetical to the proper goal of ethics—to figure out what to do, how to live, and how to be. The lesson Mills draws from his discussion of the many vices of ideal theory is that "the best way to bring about the ideal is by recognizing the

21 Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*.

22 Indeed, one of the most prominent reviews of Nozick's book mentions neither "historical injustice" nor reparations. See Nagel, "Libertarianism Without Foundations." This is despite the fact that such a discussion would seem to, as Mills might put it, "logically follow" upon reading Nozick's book. But it is not as simple as seeing what follows from what. After all, publications citing Nozick's book that mention reparations are relatively few in the years following its publication. From 1974 to 1984, there are eighteen instances of 'reparations' within citing articles. The 1990s to the early 2000s is also quite slim: from 1984 to 1994 there are thirty-one instances; and from 1994 to 2004 there are seventy-eight. It is only following Mills's influential article "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," published in 2005, that many readers of Nozick seem to draw the connection *en masse*: from 2004 to 2014, there are 293 instances of 'reparations' within citing articles. That said, as Katrina Forrester notes, there *was* a debate going on in the late 1960s and 1970s about reparations within political philosophy. See Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice*, 133nn156–58. What is presumably at issue for Mills, however, is that relatively few readers of Nozick took seriously what followed from his theory. One notable exception is Bernard Williams's 1975 review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, recently reprinted as Williams, "*Anarchy, State and Utopia*, by Robert Nozick."

nonideal, and that by assuming the ideal or the near-ideal, one is only guaranteeing the perpetuation of the nonideal" (185).[23]

3. NONIDEAL THEORY AS IDEOLOGY

The familiar origin story of the nonideal theory turn takes the form of a two-stage redemption narrative, whereby a particular group of theorists are delivered from the distorting illusions produced by ideal theory, thereby allowing them to finally begin the hard work of theorizing about the real world, sans ideology. But the origin story is false—or at least the "sans ideology" qualifier is.

Now as I mentioned earlier, I am not the first to raise the worry that nonideal theory is subject to ideology critique. To give a recent example, Matthew Adams sums up his ideology critique of nonideal theory as follows:

> The rejection of the orthodox ideal theory paradigm can be explained by the increasing infiltration of capitalist and managerial social attitudes into academia. These social attitudes have commodified people's conception of justice and, consequently, induced suspicion of ideal theory, which is not construed as having direct practical value. Consequently, nonideal methodology performs the distorting social role of reifying and enforcing unjust features of the status quo: the hegemonies of capitalism and managerialism that induced suspicion of ideal theory.[24]

In what follows, I aim to build on Adams's ideology critique. At a macro level, both Adams and I are offering ideology critiques of nonideal methodology. At a micro level, Adams focuses on applied ethics to show how the rising interest in nonideal methodology coincides with the growing demand for "relevant" research, where relevance is construed as having a demonstrable and calculable (social) impact that can be weighed by university administrators for the long-term goal of expanding a withering undergraduate enrollment, acquiring

23 I note that there is an extensive literature devoted to rescuing ideal theory from Mills's critique. The literature exemplifies a common feature of many philosophical debates, with some holding that ideal theory can be fully vindicated, others claiming that it can only be partially vindicated, and still others finding Mills's critique particularly worrisome. But let us set these concerns aside for now. My goal in the following section is to apply a structurally similar critique to nonideal theory—one that is appropriate by Mills's own lights—in order to show that nonideal theory does not get off on the cheap. I note also that some readers may be skeptical about the very possibility of ideology critique as construed by Mills, Haslanger, Shelby, etc. See, e.g., Sankaran, "What's New in the New Ideology Critique?"

24 Adams, "An Ideology Critique of Nonideal Methodology," 676. See also Stahl, "What (If Anything) Is Ideological About Ideal Theory?" for discussion of Adams's point.

research grants, and so on. At a micro level, I am interested in our thought and talk about justice in the workplace. I will take Elizabeth Anderson's *Private Government* as a recent paradigmatic example of nonideal theorizing about justice in the workplace.[25] The main claim I will make in this section is that nonideal theory is ideological in virtue of the fact that it rules out more radical utopian ways of theorizing by methodological fiat. And both friends and foes of radical utopian political views should find this fear of utopia troublesome because a first-order view about what justice in the workplace requires should not be ruled out by one's particular second-order methodological commitments.

Following a few recent and influential nonideal theory critiques of the workplace, let us take three things for granted. First, let us take for granted that workers are *dominated*—that is, they are subject to the arbitrary and unaccountable will of their employers in the workplace.[26] Second, let us take for granted that this domination is *pervasive*—that is, it occurs both inside and outside the workplace. Domination occurs inside the workplace, for example, when workers are not permitted to take adequate bathroom breaks and are thus "forced to wear diapers" to keep up with their productivity targets.[27] Domination occurs outside the workplace, for example, when workers are "pressured by their bosses to favor some political candidate or issue, by threats of job loss, wage cuts, or plant closure."[28] Finally, let us take for granted that the *severity* of workplace domination is often positively correlated with one's social/political/economic status. For instance, Anderson notes that the abuses suffered by "hundreds of thousands" of undocumented migrant workers "include fraud, being forced to work without pay, rape and sexual harassment, beatings, torture, confinement to the workplace and to squalid housing for which extortionate rent is charged, exhausting hours, isolation, religious compulsion, and psychological manipulation and intimidation."[29]

25 Anderson, *Private Government*.

26 See, e.g., Pettit, *On the People's Terms*; and O'Shea, "Are Workers Dominated?" and "Socialist Republicanism."

27 Anderson, *Private Government*, 135. Anderson cites Oxfam America, "No Relief."

28 Anderson, *Private Government*, 135. Consider, as another example, cases of "wage slavery," whereby workers are dominated by the demands of the market. If they try and strike, there may be a reserve of unemployed workers who are ready and willing to take their places, thus rendering their resistance inefficacious. It is in this sense, then, that for Marx, all wage workers are wage slaves in the sense that they are bound to work within the wage system, i.e., the capitalist mode of production. See Marx, *Capital*. For a contemporary examination of wage slavery, see Gourevitch, "Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work," 595. Thanks to an anonymous referee for asking me to clarify this footnote.

29 Anderson, *Private Government*, 137.

So what is to be done? Anderson says that there are "four ways to improve the freedom and equality of workers: exit, rule of law constraints on employers, constitutional rights, and voice."[30] Note that these four ways of improving the freedom and equality of workers nicely align with the methodological commitments of nonideal theory that I outlined in section 1. Improving the exit rights of workers—either by prosecuting employers who arbitrarily interfere with employees' rights to exit or by promoting a universal basic income—can be done in a piecemeal fashion, thus satisfying the transitional requirement.[31] So too with modifying the rule-of-law constraints on employers. Whether the problem is with flawed antitrust law, inefficient market signals, outmoded foreign trade policies, rent seeking, or some combination thereof, one can simply chip away at the margins of law as it is and thereby construct the right constraints on employers.[32] In working along any of these axes, we take seriously the feasibility constraints within our liberal constitutional market society and therefore satisfy the realistic requirement. All the necessary changes being made, we can run the same gambit on the domain of constitutional rights. And finally, the recognition that workers need *voice* in the workplace assumes that not all firms comply with the demands of justice and therefore need to be held accountable to the workers who they govern.[33] Of course if things were otherwise, then perhaps workers would not need voice. But in the real world, the domination exerted by firms is persistent, pervasive, and severe, and so we should theorize with the partial compliance requirement if we want to figure out what to do in the here and now.

But are these reforms enough to bring about freedom both within and outside the workplace? Or do they preclude a more revolutionary politics? Two answers present themselves. A steadfast reformist will say that the freedom of workers will be greatly improved by instituting any one of these reforms. Of course, no steadfast reformist completely agrees with another on the details. Some believe that a universal basic income is the solution. Others say that we also need workplace democracy. And others think that we need to tinker with some combination thereof and also tackle outdated antitrust law, and so on. But all steadfast reformists agree on one thing: the solution lies somewhere

30 Anderson, *Private Government*, 133.

31 On skepticism about the sufficiency of universal basic income, see Gourevitch, "Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work"; and Nieswandt, "Automation, Basic Income and Merit."

32 For a recent influential criticism of the consumer welfare model of antitrust law, see Khan, "Amazon's Antitrust Paradox."

33 On workplace democracy, see, e.g., Frega et al., "Workplace Democracy"; and Landemore and Ferreras, "In Defense of Workplace Democracy."

within the standard liberal package, and so we should nudge ourselves towards a comprehensive rethink of liberal democracy.[34]

Radical revolutionaries think that steadfast reformists are naive and misguided. No doubt, radical revolutionaries find it hard to agree with one another on the details too. Some believe that we need to "smash capitalism" because the system is rotten and cannot be reformed, while others believe that we need to "tame capitalism" with radical anticapitalist reforms much stronger than those recommended by steadfast reformists.[35] Yet despite their disagreements, all radical revolutionaries agree on one thing: the solution lies somewhere *outside* the standard liberal package, and so we should overthrow the system and strive towards utopia.[36]

Notice that from the point of view of a radical revolutionary, the background presuppositions of nonideal theory will seem ideological in virtue of the fact that they rule out more radical utopian ways of theorizing by methodological fiat.[37] They will say that what the transitional requirement does in practice is encourage us to frame our political problems as policy problems that can be resolved through clever nudge schemes, constitutional tinkering, etc. But the radical revolutionary holds that the *cause* of our contemporary workplace ills—i.e., capitalism—is not properly addressed by focusing on piecemeal reform. Moreover, the radical revolutionary will say that in adopting the realistic requirement, we inaccurately represent certain features of our global market order as fixed, but part of the point of thinking critically about domination in the workplace is to *denaturalize* these oppressive orders.[38] And herein lies the epistemic horn of the ideology critique: these issues of workplace domination are salient injustices; thus, a theory is epistemically deficient

34 I borrow the phrase 'standard liberal package' from Patten, *Equal Recognition*. For proponents who are broadly sympathetic with the steadfast reformist position as I describe it here, see, e.g., the bibliography of Courtland, Gaus, and Schmidtz, "Liberalism."

35 I borrow these terms and general framing from Wright, *How to Be an Anticapitalist in the Twenty-First Century*, 38–42. For proponents of each, see Wright's book. There are of course more proponents to consider, and the sketch I have given here is intentionally vague on a few important details. But readers are free to fill in those details in whatever way they deem most plausible.

36 For proponents who are broadly sympathetic with the radical revolutionary position as I describe it here, see, e.g., the bibliography of Leopold, "Analytical Marxism." All the qualifiers in the previous footnote apply here too.

37 See also ideal anarchists, e.g., G. A. Cohen, Jacob T. Levy, Christopher Freiman, and Jason Brennan, as cited in Brennan and Freiman, "Why Not Anarchism?" All the necessary changes being made, one could perhaps run the same critique against nonideal theory from an ideal anarchist point of view.

38 Cf. Queloz, *The Practical Origins of Ideas*, 102.

insofar as it fails to account for the true cause of such injustices. The functional horn of the ideology critique naturally follows: the best explanation for why nonideal theorists utilize, say, the transitional requirement is that it allows them to endlessly defer these issues: rather than theorize beyond what is possible *outside* of capitalism, they encourage us to endlessly tinker *within* it. Thus, for the radical revolutionary, both the principles of nonideal theory and the practices of nonideal theorizers function to obscure the importance of such issues. The proper way to highlight such issues is to start doing ideal theory. Take up the utopian requirement, radical revolutionaries say, and ask how we would behave if we were to transcend the capitalist market order.

No doubt steadfast reformists will find the radical revolutionary ideology critique unpersuasive. They might even grant the sociological fact that the methodological commitments of nonideal theory—e.g., the transitional requirement—does function in such a way so as to eliminate a more revolutionary politics from the frame of inquiry. Yet they will contend that there is nothing wrong with this because the best we can hope for is a modest form of liberalism, warts and all. They will further point out that the radical revolutionary ideology critique holds only if we cannot imagine a fully just liberal society that functions within a global capitalist order. But they will say that we can imagine such a reasonable utopia and therefore do not need to smash capitalism.[39] Of course a radical revolutionary will regard this sort of reply as evidence that steadfast reformists are wholly caught up in their bad ideology. And the steadfast reformists will provide their arguments yet again for why their view is not ideological. Eventually, both sides will reach a point at which neither can provide the other a non-question-begging response because there is so little common ground that is agreed upon.

For the sake of argument, let us grant that steadfast reformists are right in holding that some subset of radical revolutionaries are misguided in thinking that we need to smash capitalism, and anyone who disagrees with the steadfast reformists is caught up in bad ideology. Still, it seems harder for steadfast reformists to evade the charge by a different sort of radical revolutionary who claims that we simply need to tame capitalism with radical anticapitalist reforms much stronger than the sort of reforms recommended by steadfast

39 See Wright, *How to Be an Anticapitalist in the Twenty-First Century*, 38–42. Again, unfortunately, I lack the space here to fill in the necessary details of what exactly makes one reform *R* count as an instance of taming or smashing capitalism. The details will in turn depend on how one wants to carve up the distinction between radical revolutionaries and steadfast reformists.

reformists.[40] Here there is *some* common ground. And so it seems open for this sort of radical revolutionary to ask the steadfast reformists: How sure are you that nonideal theory escapes ideology critique? Is it not possible that the framing of political problems vis-à-vis nonideal theory—that is, the eschewing of utopia in favor of realism—sometimes functions to preclude revolutionary politics? Of course, this may not always be the case. We may be able to nudge ourselves towards freedom on a wide variety of issues. But surely we cannot rely on piecemeal reform for everything.

At this point, I think epistemic humility requires that steadfast reformists concede at least *something* to the ideology critique of the radical revolutionary. They do not of course have to abandon their framework. But it does seem reasonable for them to respond not by digging their heels in. Insofar as steadfast reformists regard their radical revolutionary interlocutors as reasonable, they ought to acknowledge that they cannot rule out that they are *not* in ideology and should therefore investigate the possibility further. Indeed, this is just what Rawls—a steadfast reformist *par excellence*—prompts his readers to do in a footnote of *Justice as Fairness*:

> The idea of political philosophy as reconciliation must be invoked with care. For political philosophy is always in danger of being used corruptly as a defense of an unjust and unworthy status quo, and thus of being ideological in Marx's sense. From time to time we must ask whether justice as fairness, or any other view, is ideological in this way; and if not, why not? Are the very basic ideas it uses ideological? How can we show they are not?[41]

4. What was the point of the ideal/nonideal theory debate?

Nothing I have said here will fully resolve the debate between ideal and nonideal theorists. Like most philosophical debates, the one side will respond by

40 As an anonymous referee has pointed out, there is perhaps something strange with using the label 'radical revolutionary' to describe such a view, since, by some philosophers' lights, it is not revolutionary at all. But the labels are not too important, so feel free to swap them if you please.

41 Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 4n4. It is curious that nonideal theorists inspired by Rawls have not taken up this task in a detailed and thorough manner. No doubt I have provided only the contours of how these questions posed by Rawls might be answered. But I hope to have laid something of a groundwork for future inquiry. For what it is worth, I am largely sympathetic to Anderson's diagnosis of our contemporary workplace ills, and I agree with her on the solutions. Still, I think it is false to think of myself as wholly insulated from ideology critique. One of the targets of this essay is therefore, somewhat ironically, myself.

modifying their view so as to evade the objections of the other side, and the other side will in turn respond by saying that the modified view either inadequately addresses the objection, misunderstands it, or illegitimately evades the objection by means of an ad hoc patch. If that is how things proceed, then I do not purport to have provided a clean resolution to the dialectic. But perhaps we can dissolve the apparent need for a resolution by asking whether a dissolution is possible. For given the persistence of the debate, both sides may benefit from taking a step back to ask: What does it say about ourselves that we are having a debate about whether we should do political philosophy using ideal theory or nonideal theory?[42]

Here is one sort of answer we might give—let us call it the *optimist answer*. We are having the ideal/nonideal theory debate because, in part, we are trying to figure out if the Rawlsian paradigm is correct. And the Rawlsian paradigm tells us that we cannot grasp the pressing problems of political philosophy unless we can see them clearly and distinctly. Yet in order to see them clearly and distinctly, we need to figure out the correct ideal theory. Thus, we must theorize in stages: first, we get all the details of the correct ideal theory specified, and then we turn to the messy, nonideal world and apply the theory.[43]

On this telling, the ideal/nonideal theory debate is born out of disagreement with the Rawlsian paradigm. Understood as a game of choosing sides, it is now increasingly common to hear philosophers and theorists self-identify as either an "ideal theorist" or "nonideal theorist." Most parties to this debate seem to think that providing a resolute answer to the ideal/nonideal theory debate will give us some firm ground upon which we can build a systematic theory of justice. Simply put, they say that we are having the debate because we are trying to figure out what we should think about how we think about justice.

Here is another sort of answer we might give—let us call it the *pessimist answer*. Our having the ideal/nonideal theory debate is *itself* a form of ideology, one that serves to reinforce the status quo by convincing political philosophers/theorists that the most pressing problems are metaproblems, i.e., problems

42 Cf. Moyn, *The Last Utopia*, *Human Rights and the Uses of History*, and *Not Enough*. Moyn also poses a similar question regarding the rapid ascendancy of human rights discourse, thereby calling into question their neutral political status. "To know what to make of human rights," Moyn provocatively suggests, we must first "understand what they have made of us" (*Human Rights and the Uses of History*, 169). In a similar vein, we might also ask the participants to this debate, of which I am one: What is it about our particular historical moment that brought us to have *this* debate? What has the debate over ideal/nonideal theory made of us?

43 For a nice overview of this narrative of the debate, see Levy, "There Is No Such Thing as Ideal Theory." For the "stages" of theorizing in Rawls, see Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 9, and *The Law of Peoples*, 90.

about what we should think about what we are doing. But this framing simply moves the bump under the rug, for if Rawls's view was mistaken, then surely it is wrong to hold the neighboring view, which says that "The reason for beginning with [the debate over ideal/nonideal] theory is that it provides . . . the only basis for the systematic grasp of these more pressing problems"[44]

Here the specter of ideology critique resurfaces, for it is not clear that we *must* begin political philosophy/theory by working out all the details to methodological questions. Indeed, in emphasizing methodological questions we may displace the importance of first-order questions by endlessly deferring them.[45] And in some part, this seems to be the function of the ideal/nonideal theory debate: to convince professional philosophers that their conceptual labor is essential for figuring out what the correct methodological commitments are, which, in turn, is necessary for figuring out how to make any progress on real-world, pressing problems. This is a flattering picture of the role of philosophers in creating social change.[46] On this picture, philosophers occupy an Archimedean perspective that allows them to see beyond the muddled, situated perspectives of the dominated and the oppressed; philosophers, through their careful distinction-making, gain insight into how much we should or should not idealize when we are thinking about justice; and crucially, on this picture, philosophers' labor is not only essential but lexically prior to any social change: first comes the question of whether ideal or nonideal theory is correct, then comes the working out the details of one's first-order theorizing, then comes social change.[47] But the picture is backwards. It is often through radical political upheavals (e.g., the civil rights movement) that philosophers come to modify the details of their first-order theorizing (i.e., what fixed-points *seem*,

44 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 8.

45 Cf. Moyn, *Not Enough*. Jiewuh Song reads Moyn as arguing for a "displacement thesis, on which the human rights practice has crowded out political space for more ambitious projects, with deleterious consequences" ("Human Rights and Inequality," 350). Though note that Moyn seems to have made some concessions to the "displacement thesis" in recent work, e.g., in "Sufficiency, Equality, and Human Rights."

46 Taking up a skeptical attitude towards such a picture, Amia Srinivasan writes: "I fear that the thought that what we need, politically speaking, is analytic philosophy . . . is one more legitimation myth of which we should be suspicious. After all, it would be convenient for us as professional philosophers not only if our somewhat peculiar skills turned out to be essential for the pursuit of justice but also if it turned out that the use of those skills could render political revolution, especially violent revolution, unnecessary" ("Philosophy and Ideology," 379).

47 The picture is essentially an inversion of some of the central claims of feminist standpoint epistemology. See, e.g., Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint"; and Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*. Both are cited in Srinivasan, "Radical Externalism," 411n27.

upon reflection, fixed), and only thereafter do they reconceptualize what they take themselves to be *doing* in theorizing about justice.

It is no surprise, then, that philosophers and theorists tell this flattering tale about themselves, for being the judge in their own case, it is only natural that they regard their skills and theorizing as lexically prior to social change. But this is nothing new. This flattering tale—about the priority of the ideal/nonideal theory debate—is simply a particular instance of a more general phenomenon that has been with us at least since Marx's critique of the ideologists—that is, artists, priests, lawyers, and so on.[48] Marx said that they were superstructural workers who mistakenly believed that their ideal products (their ideas) were the driving force of history and social change.[49] Thus, for Marx, a judge who applies the law regards their legislation as the real, active driving force of history; an artist who makes works of art regards their art as having a sort of capacity for social change; and so on. But they are all equally mistaken—at least by Marx's lights—for neither the law nor art nor any other ideal product *really* changes the world: the material forces do. Artists, lawyers, philosophers, and all the rest merely tag along for the ride, and when a given social movement takes flight they (flatteringly) attribute causal powers to their ideal products.[50] Here is precisely where the ideology critique of the ideal/nonideal theory debate rears its head: academic philosophers think that working out the right answers to methodological questions will change the world. They think that a change in people's *ideas* will enact social change. But they are fundamentally mistaken. To think as

48 Here I am heavily indebted to Mills, "'Ideology' in Marx and Engels." Cf. Roberts, "Ideology and Self-Emancipation," para. 7.

49 See Marx, *The German Ideology*. Note well that Marx's critique of ideologists is not synonymous with so-called ideology critique in the sense that I and others use the term. While the way I have opted to use 'ideology critique' in this essay may be extensionally adequate, it is perhaps a bit historically anachronistic, a manner of speaking handed down to analytic philosophers from Raymond Geuss, among others. Cf. Srinivasan, "Genealogy, Epistemology and Worldmaking," 140–47. See also Mills, "'Ideology' in Marx and Engels." Srinivasan notes that we ought to distinguish critical genealogy from ideology critique. While the latter reveals a deficient epistemic status, the former merely lays bare the *function* of our ideologies. For better or for worse, ideology critique (of the sort done by the late Mills, Shelby, Haslanger, etc.) has come to mean something different from critical genealogy, but it is important to keep in mind that I and other participants in this debate are using the term in a circumscribed *pejorative* sense, and so there is a danger of making historical connections where they are not warranted or, worse, of anachronistically interpreting, say, Marx as a proponent of "ideology critique." By my lights (and the early Mills's), Marx is *not* doing straightforward ideology critique, though misinterpreting him in such a way may have led to the development of ideology critique. *Mutatis mutandis*, cf. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*.

50 See Mills, "'Ideology' in Marx and Engels," 12. Cf. Mills and Goldstick, "A New Old Meaning of 'Ideology'," 423.

they do is to suppose, with the Young Hegelians, that the driving force of history is what is inside people's heads—namely, ideas. But concepts do not change the world. People do. Of course, people operate with a given set of concepts, and it is important for them to pause and reflect on how their concepts frame their projects and guide their actions. But it is equally important to recognize that these sorts of methodological endeavors are not prior to social change. So the charge against the contemporary proponent of the ideal/nonideal theory debate is that they are caught up in bad ideology insofar as they see their product—i.e., their papers, books, talks, and so on—as being necessary for social change.[51]

5. A PLEA FOR PLURALISM

So if the very debate between ideal and nonideal theorists is itself a form of ideology, then what should we do? I think both parties to the debate should recognize that ideal theory and nonideal theory, understood as models for helping us grasp what justice is, are on a similar plane. And though it is difficult to occupy both perspectives at once, we can strive to oscillate between the two, without ever quite knowing whether we are occupying the right vantage point.[52] From the standpoint of the ideal theorist, it may seem like the point of a theory of justice is to tell us what to think, not what to do. The point is to get at the facts about what justice requires, come what may (à la the utopian requirement). Yet from the point of view of the nonideal theorist, the opposite seems true: the point of a theory of justice is to tell us what to do, not merely what to think (à la the realistic requirement). The point is to change the world, not to merely theorize about it. Both of these standpoints are inescapable, and they routinely conflict. Thus, upon finding ourselves caught between realism and utopia, it is only natural that we strive for a synthesis at the second-order level. Perhaps such a synthesis is forthcoming. In any case, we do not need to resolve the debate between ideal/nonideal theorists to address the pressing problems head on. We can be pluralists and oscillate back and forth between these two modes of theorizing without a decision procedure to tell us when

51 As flattering as this picture is, it is not obviously true that we need a clear picture of *how* to start theorizing about social change before we can *begin* theorizing about social change. What is more, it is not plainly true that what we need is more theory. We should be alive to the Althusserian worry that often "those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical *denegation* of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says, 'I am ideological'" (Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," 175).

52 Cf. Hall, *Cultural Studies 1983*, 84.

we should take up one perspective or the other.[53] We can look closely at the pressing problems right in front of us and ask ourselves what the point of our theorizing is in each case, and then further ask whether we should take up an ideal or nonideal theory perspective. We can do this while recognizing that in theorizing we must take up a point of view, however flawed that point of view might be.[54] Once we accept this fact—that methodology will not save us—we can finally leave the ideal/nonideal theory debate behind and thereafter begin to ask more productive and fruitful questions.

But before we start asking the more productive and fruitful questions, we should concern ourselves with one final worry—namely, that even if the pluralist position fares better than a strict form of ideal or nonideal theory, it may be, tragically, yet another instance of ideology. For surely pluralists do not occupy an Archimedean perspective that allows *them* to see beyond the problems and perils of ideal or nonideal theorists. Indeed, according to some critics, the problem with pluralists is that they still *think* with the categories of "ideal theory" and "nonideal theory." And the problem with these categories—which now occupy a reified status in contemporary political philosophy—is that they encourage us to ask political questions from a point of view that excludes from our frame of inquiry philosophers and theorists who are neither ideal nor nonideal theorists.[55]

Marx comes to mind. For Marx is not, according to many interpretations, simply trying to get at what justice requires (à la the utopian requirement).[56] That is, he is not constructing an ideal theory of a perfectly just society and thereafter critiquing existing societies for failing to meet that standard. Nor is he straightforwardly a nonideal theorist who theorizes on the terms given to us by steadfast reformists. He is a radical revolutionary of a different sort, which is why it is difficult to capture what Marx was up to using our contemporary categories of ideal/nonideal theory.[57] Marx's critique of capitalism—and indeed, of workplace domination—is rooted in a collection of comprehensive doctrines—

53 Cf. Levy, *Rationalism, Pluralism, and Freedom*, 290n7, on synthesizing impulses in political theory, especially Hegel and Taylor.

54 Cf. Walters, "The Aptness of Envy," 8n13.

55 As an anonymous referee has pointed out, theorists such as Hobbes, Kwame Nkrumah, Plato, and Lenin do not fit neatly into these categories. Cf. Du Bois, "The Propaganda of History." It is also worth asking how the ideal/nonideal theory debate fits into the wider context of political philosophy. On this, see, e.g., McKeon, "The Interpretation of Political Theory and Practice in Ancient Athens."

56 This issue is highly contentious. For an overview of the debate, see Geras, "The Controversy About Marx and Justice."

57 Perhaps this difficulty of categorization explains why the name Marx never appears in the canonical overview of the ideal/nonideal theory debate, i.e., Valentini, "Ideal vs. Non-ideal Theory."

namely, a theory of historical materialism, a theory of how capitalism functions, and perhaps even an ethical vision.[58] This all comes as a package deal for Marx. And if something of a broadly Marxist view is tenable, then it gives us a way not only to bypass the ideal/nonideal theory debate but to render it ideological.[59]

So we are faced with a choice. On the one hand, we can be pluralists and accept the categories given to us by the ideal/nonideal theory debate but reject the demand to decisively come down on one side or the other. On the other hand, we can take a cue from Marx and reject the categories of the ideal/nonideal theory debate and do political philosophy otherwise. I raise this choice not to provide a decisive answer but rather to call our attention to the striking fact that despite their many disagreements, both pluralists and Marxists offer us ways to bypass the ideal/nonideal theory debate. Pluralists extend an olive branch to ideal and nonideal theorists, exhorting both to go on theorizing with their inherited categories and distinctions, all the while recognizing the ideological risks that are bound to occur along the way. Marxists throw down their gauntlet and press all parties to the debate to acknowledge that the categories that they have inherited from the ideal/nonideal theory debate are not neutral ways of carving up political phenomena: they too have a history, and so it is well and wise to examine how they function so as to exclude certain questions, approaches, and phenomena from one's frame of inquiry.[60] The crucial lesson for our purposes here is that whatever side you find yourself on—pluralist or Marxist or some hybrid variant thereof—it follows that that the debate between ideal/nonideal theory is ideological. It also follows, somewhat ironically, that perhaps even this essay is caught up in bad ideology insofar as it is yet another contribution to the ideal/nonideal theory debate. That may be so. In any case, we ought to finally move on and address the pressing problems of political philosophy head on.[61]

McGill University
jordan.walters@mail.mcgill.ca

58 See, e.g., Wills, *Marx's Ethical Vision*.

59 I am indebted to an anonymous referee for asking me to clarify these points in the preceding two paragraphs and for their suggestions about how Marx might fit into this dialectic. On the role of abstraction in Marx, see, e.g., Ilyenkov, *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's Capital.* On the material context of philosophical ideas, see Wood, *Liberty and Property*.

60 The choice that I have set up here is influenced by McClendon, "Black and White Contra Left and Right?"; Sayer, *Method in Social Science*; and Ferguson, "Contractarianism as Method." Thanks to an anonymous referee for recommending these sources.

61 I would like to thank an anonymous associate editor and two anonymous referees at *JESP* for their excellent comments on this essay. I am also grateful to Matthew Adams, Harry

REFERENCES

Adams, Matthew. "An Ideology Critique of Nonideal Methodology." *European Journal of Political Theory* 20, no. 4 (2021): 675–97.

Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation." In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster. Monthly Review Press, 1971.

Anderson, Elizabeth. *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk About It)*. Princeton University Press, 2017.

Barrett, Jacob. "Deviating from the Ideal." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 107, no. 1 (2022): 31–52.

Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. Oxford University Press, 1973.

Brennan, Jason, and Christopher Freiman. "Why Not Anarchism?" *Politics, Philosophy and Economics* 21, no. 4 (2022): 415–36.

Cohen, G. A. *Rescuing Justice from Equality*. Harvard University Press, 2008.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment.* Routledge, 2000.

Courtland, Shane D., Gerald Gaus, and David Schmidtz. "Liberalism." In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2022). https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/liberalism.

Du Bois, W. E. B. "The Propaganda of History." In *Black Reconstruction in America*, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. Oxford University Press, 1935.

Estlund, David. *Utopophobia: On the Limits (If Any) of Political Philosophy*. Princeton University Press, 2020.

Ferguson, Stephen C, II. "Contractarianism as Method: Rawls *Contra* Mills." *Cultural Logic: A Journal of Marxist Theory and Practice* 15 (2008): 1–33.

Forrester, Katrina. *In the Shadow of Justice: Postwar Liberalism and the Remaking of Political Philosophy*. Princeton University Press, 2019.

Frega, Roberto, Lisa Herzog, and Christian Neuhäuser. "Workplace Democracy:

Ainscough, Alex Carty, Katie Ebner-Landy, William Paris, Travis Quigley, Khaleel Rajwani, William Clare Roberts, and Ezekiel Vergara for their outstanding written comments. Many thanks as well to audiences at GRIPP, McGill, the PPE Society, and the Britain and Ireland Association for Political Thought for their incisive questions. Arash Abizadeh and Jacob T. Levy are owed a special thanks for prompting me to rethink and revise substantial portions of a previous version of this essay. Finally, I am especially grateful to William Clare Roberts for his outstanding advice and support and, relatedly, to everyone in his 2022 seminar on ideology; but for that seminar, this essay would not exist. Work on this essay was generously supported by a SSHRC Doctoral Scholarship to Honour Nelson Mandela, fellowships from GRIPP, CRÉ, and GRIN, and a Lin-Oliver Fellowship from the Research Group on Constitutional Studies at McGill University.

The Recent Debate." *Philosophy Compass* 14, no. 4 (2019): 1–11.
Geras, Norman. "The Controversy About Marx and Justice." In *Marxist Theory*, edited by Alex Callinicos. Oxford University Press, 1989.
Geuss, Raymond. *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School*. Cambridge University Press, 1981.
Gilabert, Pablo. "Comparative Assessments of Justice, Political Feasibility, and Ideal Theory." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 15, no. 1 (2012): 39–56.
Gourevitch, Alex. "Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work." *Political Theory* 41, no. 4 (2013): 591–617.
Hall, Stuart. *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*. Edited by Jennifer Daryl Slack and Lawrence Grossberg. Duke University Press, 2016.
Hartsock, Nancy. "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism." In *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, edited by Sandra Harding and Merill B. Hintikka. Springer Dordrecht, 1983.
Haslanger, Sally. "Political Epistemology and Social Critique." In *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy*, vol. 7, edited by David Sobel, Peter Vallentyne, and Steven Wall. Oxford University Press, 2021.
———. "Racism, Ideology, and Social Movements." *Res Philosophica* 94, no. 1 (2017): 1–22.
Ilyenkov, Evald Vasilyevich. *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's Capital*. Aakar Books, 2008.
Kahane, Guy. "Evolutionary Debunking Arguments." *Noûs* 45, no. 1 (2011): 103–25.
Khan, Lina M. "Amazon's Antitrust Paradox." *Yale Law Journal* 126, no. 710 (2017): 710–805.
Landemore, Hélène, and Isabelle Ferreras. "In Defense of Workplace Democracy: Towards a Justification of the Firm–State Analogy." *Political Theory* 44, no. 1 (2016): 53–81.
Leopold, David. "Analytical Marxism." In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2022). https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/marxism-analytical.
Levy, Jacob T. *Rationalism, Pluralism, and Freedom*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
———. "There Is No Such Thing as Ideal Theory." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 33, nos. 1–2 (2016): 312–33.
Marx, Karl. *Capital: Critique of Political Economy*. Vol. 1. Translated by Paul Reitter. Edited by Paul Reitter and Paul North. Princeton University Press, 2024.
———. "The German Ideology." In *The Marx Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., edited by Robert C. Tucker. W. W. Norton and Company, 1972.

McClendon, John H, III. "Black and White Contra Left and Right? The Dialectics of Ideological Critique in African American Studies." *APA Newsletter: Philosophy and the Black Experience* 1, no. 2 (2002): 47–56.

McKeon, Richard. "The Interpretation of Political Theory and Practice in Ancient Athens." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 42, no. 1 (1981): 3–12.

Mills, Charles W. "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology." *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (2005): 165–84.

———. "'Ideology' in Marx and Engels: Revisited and Revised." *Philosophical Forum* 16, no. 4 (1985): 327–46.

Mills, Charles W., and Danny Goldstick. "A New Old Meaning of 'Ideology'." *Dialogue* 28, no. 3 (1989): 417–32.

Moyn, Samuel. *Human Rights and the Uses of History*. 2nd ed. Verso, 2014.

———. *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*. Belknap Press, 2010.

———. *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World*. Belknap Press, 2018.

———. "Sufficiency, Equality, and Human Rights." In *The Oxford Handbook of Economic and Social Rights*, edited by Malcolm Langford and Katharine G. Young. Oxford University Press, 2022.

Nagel, Thomas. "Libertarianism Without Foundations: Review of *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, by Robert Nozick." *Yale Law Journal* 85, no. 1 (1975): 136–49.

Nieswandt, Katharina. "Automation, Basic Income and Merit." In *Whither Work? The Politics and Ethics of Contemporary Work*, edited by Keith Breen and Jean-Philippe Deranty. Routledge, 2021.

Nozick, Robert. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Basic Books, 1974.

O'Shea, Tom. "Are Workers Dominated?" *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (2019): 1–24.

———. "Socialist Republicanism." *Political Theory* 58, no. 5 (2019): 548–72.

Oxfam America. "No Relief: Denial of Bathroom Breaks in the Poultry Industry." May 2016. https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/research-publications/no-relief.

Patten, Alan. *Equal Recognition: The Moral Foundations of Minority Rights*. Princeton University Press, 2014.

Pettit, Phillip. *On the People's Terms*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Queloz, Matthieu. *The Practical Origins of Ideas*. Oxford University Press, 2021.

Rawls, John. *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. Harvard University Press, 2001.

———. *The Law of Peoples*. Harvard University Press, 1999.

———. *A Theory of Justice*. Harvard University Press, 1971.

Roberts, William Clare. "Ideology and Self-Emancipation: Voluntary Servitude, False Consciousness, and the Career of Critical Social Theory." *b2o* (2024). https://www.boundary2.org/2024/05/william-clare-roberts-ideology-and-self-emancipation-voluntary-servitude-false-consciousness-and

-the-career-of-critical-social-theory/.
Rossi, Enzo, and Matt Sleat. "Realism in Normative Political Theory." *Philosophy Compass* 9, no. 10 (2014): 689–701.
Sankaran, Kirun. "What's New in the New Ideology Critique?" *Philosophical Studies* 177, no. 5 (2020): 1441–62.
Sayer, Andrew. *Method in Social Science*. Routledge, 2010.
Shelby, Tommie. "Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory." *Philosophical Forum* 34, no. 2 (2003): 153–88.
Simmons, John. A. "Ideal and Nonideal Theory." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 38, no. 1 (2010): 5–36.
Song, Jiewuh. "Human Rights and Inequality." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 47, no. 4 (2019): 347–77.
Srinivasan, Amia. "Genealogy, Epistemology and Worldmaking." *Proceedings of the Aristotelean Society* 119, no. 2 (2019): 127–56.
———. "Philosophy and Ideology." *Theoria* 31, no. 3 (2016): 371–80.
———. "Radical Externalism." *Philosophical Review* 129, no. 3 (2020): 395–431.
Stahl, Titus. "What (If Anything) Is Ideological About Ideal Theory?" *European Journal of Political Theory* 23, no. 2 (2022): 135–58.
Valentini, Laura. "Ideal vs. Non-ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map." *Philosophy Compass* 7, no. 9 (2012): 654–64.
Walters, Jordan David Thomas. "The Aptness of Envy." *American Journal of Political Science* 69, no. 1 (2025): 330–40.
Wiens, David. "Against Ideal Guidance." *Journal of Politics* 77, no. 2 (2015): 433–46.
———. "Prescribing Institutions Without Ideal Theory." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 20, no. 1 (2012): 45–70.
Williams, Bernard. "*Anarchy, State and Utopia*, by Robert Nozick." In *Essays and Reviews: 1959–2002*, edited by Michael Wood. Princeton University Press, 2014.
Wills, Vanessa Christina. *Marx's Ethical Vision*. Oxford University Press, 2024.
Wood, Ellen Meiksins. *Liberty and Property: A Social History of Western Political Thought from Renaissance to Enlightenment*. Verso, 2012.
Wright, Erik Olin. *How to Be an Anticapitalist in the Twenty-First Century*. Verso, 2019.