

A cheap solution to Laura Valentini's ideal theory paradox?

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward *Draft version:* Version 1 (14th November 2022)

Abstract. This paper offers a cheap solution to Laura Valentini's paradox of ideal theory. An ideal theory cannot be sound by definition, since in the relevant sense of "ideal theory" it involves false propositions.

"Can you hit me one more time?"

"What's the marginal utility of this crime?"

Laura Valentini famously presents a paradox of ideal theory composed of the following combination of propositions:

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

Presumably, at least one proposition must go. This paper offers a cheap solution to the paradox, involving rejecting (b).

Valentini distinguishes two senses of ideal theory in her paper:

First, a theory may be 'ideal' in a non-technical sense, insofar as it proposes an ideal of a fully just world towards which we should aim. Intuitively, it would seem that, unless a theory is ideal in this way, it cannot qualify as a normative theory of justice. Second, and more interestingly, a theory can be ideal in the technical sense of being designed under idealised, i.e., false, assumptions. (2009: 337-338)

But if she is working with the second sense, then (b) is contradictory. A theory of justice that involves false assumptions cannot be sound. It must be unsound. (Remember the use of “valid” and “sound” in logic. An argument is valid if the conclusion follows from the premises and sound if it follows from the premises and they are true. If Valentini is using “sound” in some sense which does not imply truth she owes us an explanation. Otherwise the cheap solution looks a winner!)

Reference

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