

But why is ideal theory not action guiding?

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Abstract. A component of Laura Valentini's paradox of ideal theory is that an ideal theory fails to be action guiding. But why? I present a strange but traditional reason that Valentini does not list.

I suppose your got your washing up liquid prediction 50% right

So it's La Penumbra, Mr. and Mrs. Bright!

It is a neat formulation that Laura Valentini offers of a paradox of ideal theories of justice. And I have started to investigate it. What happens when you investigate at this level, against a person with such a network? I fear they look through the material and identify every valuable response they can. And then they hand you the results and say, "What have you got to add?" (Or do they prefer to prevent you from writing by smear tactics, etc.?) Here are the 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.

How can we keep all three? I wish to focus on (c). Why does it fail to be action guiding? A response Valentini considers is that ideal theories are too remote from the actual reality of political decision making:

Ideal theories of justice might be said to lack a capacity for guidance because they are not immediately applicable to day-to-day political decisions.

(2009: 340)

But there is an opposite response, inspired by the famous ontological argument: that an ideal theory is too close to reality. It is a dodgy response I think, but I shall not evaluate it here.

Compare two conceptions of a just society which are almost identical, except the second has the quality of representing something that actually exists rather than a philosopher's fantasy. "Surely it is more ideal than the first, because of that quality." But if it actually exists, then the most ideal theory is of no use for us in guiding action, because the project is already finished. So the most ideal theory fails to be action guiding.

Reference

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