
THE NEED FOR ROOTS REDUX:
ON THE SUPPOSED DISCIPLINARY RIGHT TO A NONIDEAL THEORY

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“The terrorism of pure theory must clear the field.”¹

In 2002, Rene Arcilla made a landmark admission: there is a problem in educational philosophy. More specifically, he characterized this problem as an “uncanny” and “established silence between philosophy and education.”² Arcilla is clear that his essay is “not about solving an established problem”³ but rather about pointing out or diagnosing as a problem the confining of philosophy to high theoretical irrelevance and the attendant drifting away of education to the empirically grounded, and therefore supposedly more action-guiding, social sciences. Although Arcilla’s personal solution is a return to the Deweyan roots of philosophy as an outgrowth of concrete social problems, other attempts at solving or dissolving the problem have proliferated since Arcilla’s confession. Harvey Siegel, writing in direct response to Arcilla, suggests that Arcilla has created a false problem which stems only from a dogmatic allegiance to Dewey’s vision of philosophical relevance⁴ that ought to be jettisoned. Kip Kline, again directly responding to Arcilla, albeit nearly a decade later, suggests embracing the disciplinary drift, abandoning the modern institutions of schools to the (failing) transformative agendas of the social sciences.⁵

Even more recently, a coalition has developed in support of what they see as a new type of solution to Arcilla’s problem. In the last few years, many philosophers of education have adopted the approach referred to as nonideal theory, which has its origins in contemporary normative political theory.

¹ Bruno Bauer, Letter to Marx, 1841. Quoted in William J. Brazill, *The Young Hegelians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970): 175.

² Rene Arcilla, “Why Aren’t Philosophers and Educators Speaking to Each Other?” *Educational Theory* 52, no. 1 (2002): 2.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Harvey Siegel, “Philosophy of Education and the Deweyan Legacy,” *Educational Theory* 51, no. 1 (2002): 273–80.

⁵ Kip Kline, “Toward a Post-Institutional Philosophy of Education,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 43 (2012): 10–19.

Following the work of Elizabeth Anderson,⁶ Amartya Sen,⁷ Alison Jaggar,⁸ Charles Mills,⁹ and David Schmidtz,¹⁰ among others, many philosophers of education have found solace in the view, common to all of these, that philosophical analysis need not build ideal systems from which normative principles flow downward for contemporary application. Rather, philosophy must address first, and from the particular historical situation in which it finds itself, the rectification of what Sen refers to as “manifest injustice.”¹¹ For this work, they argue, no ideal theory of perfect justice is required, or even useful.

In education particularly, much of Kenneth Howe’s recent work, for example, has leaned heavily on Anderson.¹² Alison Jaggar herself spoke on nonideal theory at the Philosophy of Education Society conference in 2014,¹³ the theme of which was the use of nonideal theory in educational philosophy. Nicholas Burbules delivered the Smith lecture at this organization’s conference the same year on nonideal theory.¹⁴ He and Kathleen Knight Abowitz have developed a related approach which they refer to as “situated philosophy” in recent years as well.¹⁵ The point of this catalog is not to single out any one particular thinker for criticism or rebuke, and the particular contents of these various approaches to nonideal theory are entirely immaterial to this discussion. Rather, I only hope to have demonstrated in this brief survey that educational philosophy, broadly speaking, has indeed turned sharply in the direction of nonideal theorizing in recent years.

The thesis of this paper is that this turn is premature, and will ultimately bear very little fruit for educational philosophy as a discipline. My argument proceeds, firstly, through a discussion of the history of nonideal theory in political philosophy, and the particular and unique historical milieu out of which it developed. Second, I argue that educational philosophy has not developed in

⁶ Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁷ Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁸ Alison Jaggar, “Designing Realistic Educational Utopias Using (Mainly) Non-Ideal Reasoning,” (presentation, Philosophy of Education Society Annual Meeting, Albuquerque, NM, 2014).

⁹ Charles W. Mills, “Ideal Theory as Ideology,” *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (2005): 165–83.

¹⁰ David Schmidtz, “Nonideal Theory: What It Is and What It Needs to Be,” *Ethics* 121 (2011): 772–96.

¹¹ Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 100.

¹² Kenneth Howe, “The Dominant Conception of Educational Equality: Ideal and Ideology” (presentation, Philosophy of Education Society Annual Meeting, Albuquerque, NM, 2014).

¹³ Jaggar, “Designing Realistic Educational Utopias.”

¹⁴ Nicholas Burbules, “Non-Ideal Theory and the Philosophy of Education,” (presentation, Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society Annual Meeting, Dayton, OH, 2014).

¹⁵ Nicholas C. Burbules and Kathleen Knight Abowitz, “A Situated Philosophy of Education,” *Philosophy of Education* 2008 (2008): 268–76.

an even relatively analogous way to political philosophy, and that the historical and contemporary distance between the two fields gives us good reasons to be suspicious of the wholesale appropriation of methods and insights of the one for use in the other. Finally, I issue a call to retain ideal theorizing, and even privilege it, in educational philosophy. I argue that a critical factor in the development of nonideal theory in political philosophy is precisely the fact that the discipline first had to pass through a long and arduous period of ideal theorizing (represented in the work of Rawls and his contemporaries). In this connection, I hope to underscore the need for us, as philosophers of education, to turn toward the foundational, the originary, the primal questions of our field rather than to the practical questions of application which have preoccupied many of us lately. These fundamental questions are where we find the fertile ground that is uniquely ours and where our philosophical roots should be planted. It is our duty, if we are to persist as a robust and discrete discipline, to plant them firmly.

A NECESSARILY BRIEF HISTORY OF NONIDEAL THEORY

In 2010, A. John Simmons wrote the following sentence in his seminal article “Ideal and Nonideal Theory”:

Perhaps we already know enough about the broad outlines of that ideal (or about essential overlaps between conflicting ideals) and about possible paths to whatever more precise version of the ideal philosophers might convincingly defend that we can proceed to responsibly address particularly grievous injustices now, without waiting for further refinement of ideal theory.¹⁶

It is worth taking a moment to parse Simmons’s language here closely. His caution is of particular note: *perhaps* we know enough about *possible* positions philosophers *might* defend that we can *responsibly* proceed to address *particularly* grievous injustice without further refinement. The implication of Simmons’s statement is quite radical, as it suggests that it is only now, after the two and a half millennia since the inauguration of ideal theory in Plato’s *Republic*, and the nearly uninterrupted procession of ideal theorizing in political philosophy since (from Augustine, to Hobbes and Rousseau, to Madison, and so on through Rawls), that we are even in a position to take seriously the idea of doing responsible nonideal theory. I want to argue, through an illumination of the genesis of nonideal theory, that Simmons’s circumspection here is warranted, and that the long historical development of ideal theory in political philosophy was indeed a necessary prerequisite to the emergence of nonideal theory.

The first explicit mention of a distinction between ideal and nonideal theory in those particular terms (although the distinction had been implicit since

¹⁶ A. John Simmons, “Ideal and Nonideal Theory,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 38, no. 1 (2010): 36.

at least Plato) comes from Rawls himself, who in *A Theory of Justice* characterizes the distinction in the following way: “the intuitive idea is to split the theory of justice into two parts. The first or ideal part assumes strict compliance and works out the principles that characterize a well-ordered society under favorable conditions.”¹⁷ Furthermore, the “ideal part presents a conception of a just society that we are to achieve if we can. Existing institutions are to be judged in light of this conception.”¹⁸ On the other hand, “Nonideal theory asks us how this long-term goal might be achieved, or worked toward, usually in gradual steps. It looks for courses of action that are morally permissible and politically possible as well as likely to be effective.”¹⁹ We can see here how Rawls’s ideal theory and the nonideal theory to come are meant to relate, and the source of the disagreement between Rawls and his detractors. For Rawls, we must begin with the moral principles underlying and justifying the use of state coercion under the best possible conditions. In order to accomplish this, Rawls contends, we must perform an abstraction away from all contingent political realities. We imagine the best possible theoretical state of affairs, bearing in mind some of what Rawls takes to be fundamental, constitutive aspects of the human person, as well as the world (moderate scarcity, the fact of reasonable pluralism with respect to views of the good, etc.)²⁰ and see what types of society would result from the application of given principles under those ideal conditions. This is analogous, in empirical science, to the isolation of a variable, in that it is done in the interest of attempting to discern the effects of different inputs with minimal obscuring influences from other sources. Rawlsian nonideal theory, then, is meant to derive from the results of our experimenting. Once our ideal theory has been specified, we can look at the society as it currently exists, and craft a route from where we are to the ideal. That is to say, once we have an ideal theory of justice, nonideal theory “studies the principles that govern how we are to deal with injustice.”²¹

Critics of both Rawls’s vision of ideal theory and the various idealizing assumptions he makes about individual actors in the well-ordered society, which necessarily abstract away from race, gender, and disability distinctions, emerged in a slow trickle after the publication of *A Theory of Justice*. Michael Phillips, an

¹⁷ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971): 245.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁹ John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999): 89.

²⁰ It is important to remember that, aside from the widespread critiques of Rawls’s ideal theory for abstracting too dramatically away from “on the ground” realities, there is another strain of criticism which argues that Rawls fails to idealize *enough*, and that his theory is in fact pessimistic, in a certain sense, about the facts of human life, capacities, economic relationships, and so on. G.A. Cohen advances this type of worry in his *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

²¹ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 8.

early detractor, argued that Rawls's ideal theory is a philosophical idle wheel in terms of determining how to deal with nonideal problems; that is, it fails to be properly action-guiding and is hence unnecessary.²² It was not until 2005, however, that the first explicitly race- and gender-based criticism of Rawlsian abstraction appeared in the form of Charles Mills's article "Ideal Theory as Ideology."²³ After creating a taxonomy of the different forms of idealization that Rawlsian theory requires, including strict compliance, idealized social ontology, silence on oppression, and others, Mills guides us to the dramatic denouement of his critique with the hanging question, "How in God's name could anybody think that this is the appropriate way to do ethics?"²⁴ Mills goes on to suggest that ideal theory, as his title suggests, is really a type of ideology, masking over the struggles and oppressions which have historically plagued our society and reflecting only "the nonrepresentative interests and experiences of a small minority of the national population—middle-to-upper-class white males."²⁵ The next salvo in the assault on Rawlsian ideal theory came in 2010, with the publication of Elizabeth Anderson's *The Imperative of Integration*, which, among other things, argued that there is no way for ideal theory to make sense of a complex and situated social problem such as integration, and that only a nonideal approach can enact any positive social change in these rather common situations. Furthermore, Anderson advocates a non-derivative nonideal theory, which need not relate itself to any grand, overarching concept of justice. She sums up her position succinctly: "Knowledge of the better does not require knowledge of the best."²⁶ The release of Anderson's book essentially coincided with the release of Sen's *The Idea of Justice*, which reached similar conclusions about the at-best unnecessary and at-worst ideologically pernicious status of ideal theory.

THE IDEAL/NONIDEAL DEBATE IN CONTEXT

I have moved deliberately quickly over the debate about the relative merits of ideal and nonideal theory. Again, my goal is not to critique or even fully explicate the views of any particular thinker, but is rather to make a larger point about the dialectical historical movement in political theory which gave rise to the debate itself. I want to advocate for a new, organic ideal theory in educational philosophy not solely based on the arguments given in its favor by Rawls, Simmons, and others, but because the very historical moment out of which nonideal theory emerged in political philosophy itself serves as a testament to the need for a fertile, extended, and deep engagement with the

²² Michael Phillips, "Reflections on the Transition from Ideal to Non-Ideal Theory," *Nous* 19, no. 4 (1985): 551–70.

²³ Mills, "Ideal Theory as Ideology."

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 172.

²⁶ Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*, 3.

fundamental questions of a discipline before discussions of practical applicability are even intelligible. Those who would simply appropriate the nonideal program and superimpose it on educational concerns are, in a perverse inversion, perpetrating the very decontextualizing ahistoricism of which they accuse Rawls himself. They are not sufficiently sensitive to the delicate brew of historical and philosophical circumstances that birthed nonideal theorizing in political philosophy, and to the disanalogies between those circumstances and the current state of affairs in educational theorizing.

When Rawls published *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, normative political theory was at what many historians view as the nadir of its productive activity in the modern era. Still reeling from the profound challenges to ethical and political philosophy from the positivist and expressivist camps that rejected the very possibility of normative philosophy of any kind, philosophy as a field had turned sharply toward the then-ascendant analytic philosophy of language. The barrage of thinking in this direction had opened up a brand new set of problems for philosophers to take on, and there seemed to be little need for political theorizing and, again, even some reasons to be skeptical of it entirely.²⁷ At the same time, the appearance in 1951 of Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in 1953 of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, and in 1956 of Sellars's *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* ushered in a series of developments which would terminate in the explosion of so-called "post-analytic"²⁸ philosophical work in the late 70's and early 80's.

Rawls's own personal development took place in the tense and fertile space between these two parallel traditions. There is ample evidence from both Rawls's early papers and the later notes he made in preparation for writing *A Theory of Justice* that indicate an oscillation between, in his earlier years, a distinctly reductive and emotivist ethical stance which isolated universal logico-linguistic principles for evaluating ethical statements²⁹ and, after his encounter with Quine during a visiting professorship at Harvard, a type of "Wittgensteinian skepticism toward agreement and commonality,"³⁰ which tempered his positivism with the commitment to pluralism that would run through all his later political work. These bivalent relationships with the dominant strands of

²⁷ A much more detailed and researched elaboration of these points can be found in Mark Bevir and Andrius Galisanka, "John Rawls in Historical Context," *History of Political Thought* 33, no. 4 (2012): 701–25.

²⁸ For a persuasive challenge to the idea that positivism was ever truly dominant or relevant in American philosophy, and a powerful historical argument that post-analytic developments were reacting to an essentially invented tradition, see Joel Isaac, "Missing Links: W.V. Quine, the Making of 'Two Dogmas,' and the Analytic Roots of Post-Analytic Philosophy," *History of European Ideas* 37 (2011): 267–79.

²⁹ Interestingly, even in these early writings, Rawls distances himself from other emotivists, notably Ayer, by holding that moral judgments, while not truth-apt, could still be judged to be "reasonable" or "unreasonable." See Bevir and Galisanka, "John Rawls in Historical Context," 704.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 714.

philosophical thinking of his time lead Mark Bevir and Andrius Galisanka to characterize Rawls as “a positivist making concessions to post-analytic themes.”³¹ It is also out of this schizophrenic mélange that we can see the emergence of the ideal/nonideal distinction. Rawls’s penchant for formal theories and system building, combined with the pseudo-pragmatist intuitions of Quine’s and Wittgenstein’s theories of language and contextual, communal use, lead him to form his two-tiered theory of ideal and nonideal theory, with the ideal roughly corresponding to Rawls’s positivist impulses, and the nonideal to his pragmatist. Again, it is worth re-emphasizing that I leave aside entirely the content of Rawls’s ideal theory here to focus on its structure *as* ideal theory, and to bring into relief the unique genesis of the current nonideal theory boom.

While Rawls’s book was something of a bombshell in the philosophical world, there is another sense in which political philosophy, pregnant with possibility which had lain dormant for so long, was primed to respond. A profound and extended conversation about the ideals and guiding principles of political philosophy ensued, and the result was perhaps the richest period in the history of the discipline. Robert Nozick was the first respondent out of the gate, publishing his *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* in 1974, in which he articulated his libertarian response to the Rawlsian liberal paradigm.³² The next major response was from Michael Sandel, whose 1982 *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* advanced a communitarian alternative and attacked some of Rawls’s abstracting devices, such as the “veil of ignorance,” as impossible for humans to utilize, even in the abstract.³³ Finally, there was the rejection of the Rawlsian presumption in favor of the redistribution of primary goods as the locus of justice by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, who advanced what they called a “capabilities approach” to human equality.³⁴ There were, of course, conversations going on in the background of these large-scale debates on the foundational aspects of political philosophy, but nearly all of them were responses to or otherwise made possible by Rawls’s original articulation of his ideal theory. The point of this brief history is to illustrate that Rawls’s intervention actually reopened the debates about the relationship between politics and ethics, what the best version of human society might look like, and so on. While there remain strong pockets of resistance in the realm of ideal theory, Rawlsian liberalism, taking into account certain feminist addenda, has essentially won the day, and it is in this established paradigm that we witness the intensification of the call for nonideal theory. What I suggest we are witnessing in the current debate about nonideal theory is a type of performative contradiction. While it may be the case that the

³¹ *Ibid.*, 725.

³² Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

³³ Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

³⁴ Amartya Sen, *Commodities and Capabilities* (Amsterdam: North Holland Press, 1985); and Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

time is finally ripe for a transition to nonideal theorizing, it is also the case that it is precisely and only in virtue of the dialectical development of the ideal theories of Rawls and his challengers, and the subsequent establishment of a Rawlsian paradigm in political philosophy, that the nonideal debate is both possible and intelligible. Nonideal theory follows ideal theory, just as Rawls initially argued.

REALISM ABOUT PHILOSOPHICO-EDUCATIONAL HISTORY

In the course of reconstructing the historical milieu of the ideal/nonideal theory debate, something ought to become starkly apparent, and another Arcillian admission must be made: the recent development of educational philosophy has in no way paralleled the development of political philosophy. Educational philosophy simply has not seen the type of large-scale clash between competing philosophical paradigms that has generated the fecund soil that is now the heritage of political philosophy.³⁵ Furthermore, while the deep historical conditions from Plato on that set the stage for Rawls represent a sustained and unbroken chain of philosophical reflection on the foundations of the political, education has no such chain, no such sustained foundational reflection. Indeed, one could plausibly argue that education can point to only a handful of philosophical figures it has a right to claim as its own in any significant sense: Plato, Rousseau, Dewey, Freire, and maybe a few others. What I mean by this is that this small group represents the only significant philosophers to explicitly dedicate a large proportion of their writing to the foundational questions regarding the nature of education, and of these Rousseau comes closest to constructing a type of Rawlsian ideal theory for the education of the child.³⁶ Beyond these, however, there are huge historical gaps where there is little or no serious philosophical analysis of education taking place, and what little we do find is either fragmentary (Aristotle), insignificant with respect to the thinker's other work (Heidegger), or only tangentially related to education, leaving us to fit the round peg of thought into the square hole of theoretical need (Kant). In Siegel's response to Arcilla, he identifies Arcilla's malady in a slightly different way, characterizing the problem as "a disastrous separation of philosophy of education from philosophy."³⁷ What I think Siegel is after here is the feeling that the "philosophy" in "philosophy of education" has fallen by the wayside, both historically and in the present. Educational thinkers do philosophy of *education*

³⁵ One might argue that we do indeed have a paradigm in education, albeit a negative rather than productive one, namely some form of neoliberalism. While this may be true in educational policy, I do not think it is in educational philosophy, which is distinct. Indeed, I feel strongly that the lack of any developed ideal theories in educational philosophy left the space open for neoliberalism to take over education as easily and quickly as it has.

³⁶ Tellingly, Rawls quotes Rousseau in further explaining his ideal theory as "taking men as they are and laws as they might be" in *The Law of Peoples*, 13.

³⁷ Siegel, "Philosophy of Education," 280.

rather than *philosophy* of education. Another way of putting this is to say that philosophy of education has become only an applied field, utilizing the theoretical developments of others to find answers to the very real practical problems that exist in schools. That is, educational theory has skipped the period of ideal debate which prefigured the development of nonideal theory in political philosophy, and has moved directly into addressing itself to the sorts of concrete problems which are the purview of nonideal theory. Rather than allow the natural development from ideal to nonideal theory along the lines predicted by Rawls (a development which we have seen play out in political theory), educational philosophy seems to have decided as a discipline that the nonideal theorizing developed by political philosophers can be simply and unproblematically appropriated from its historical and philosophical context for use with respect to educational concerns, a decision which seems to me to be unjustifiably optimistic.

Two things follow from this admission of the historical difference between political and educational philosophy. First, the appeal to nonideal theory as a *deus ex machina* to legitimate educational theory both philosophically and practically is doomed to fail. As the history of nonideal theory illustrates, it has only arisen and can only be utilized as an organic, *sui generis* development in a field with a long and sustained history of foundational theorizing and after a period of particularly fruitful ideal debate, two things that education patently lacks. Simmons may be right that enough ideal theory is settled, or at least on the table, in political philosophy that a nonideal debate is possible, but this is a debate that we have no right to as educational philosophers, and we would do well to heed Simmons's warning that "to dive into nonideal theory without an ideal theory in hand is simply to dive blind, to allow irrational free reign to the mere conviction of injustice and to eagerness for change of any sort."³⁸ Secondly, if we do aspire to a homegrown nonideal theory in education, we must refocus our attention on the generation of our own ideal understandings of the bedrock of our discipline. This is not, it must be stressed, to call for an end to debate, since it was the debate between Rawls and his critics that established the possibility for future development. Rather, it is a call for the beginning of debate. We need a debate between all of the multiplicity of ideal theories: feminist, phenomenological, anarchist, queer, utopian, and any and all other ideals we can dream up. We need also, however, for the debate to be in the form of Bauer's terroristic pure theory, and not in the mechanical application of other theories to our discipline.

CONCLUSION

In the introduction to *For Marx*, Althusser reflects on the dearth of a distinctly philosophical culture in French Marxism in the aftermath of the Second World War. He notes that "the intellectuals of petty bourgeois origin who came

³⁸ Simmons, "Ideal and Nonideal Theory," 34.

to the Party at that time felt that they had to pay in pure activity . . . the imaginary Debt they thought they had contracted *by not being proletarians*.³⁹ Can not a similar diagnosis be made—in an intellectual culture which still lauds above all else the practical, “in-the-trenches” experience of teachers—of those in educational philosophy who, perhaps, attempt to pay in pure practical theorizing the debt they think they have contracted by not being teachers?

The proposal here is that philosophers of education must make conscious efforts to avoid the practical questions of our field, at least for now. The shame in doing pure theory, which seems to me to be endemic in educational philosophy, must be overcome and our efforts must be directed at the questions which are foundationally ours not as educators, but as philosophers. A pouring out of creative and generative thinking on these fundamental questions can only help fertilize our soil, rooting us more deeply in our distinctive conceptual ecosystem, and bringing us into a closer, more profound conversation with one another.

³⁹ Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1969), 27.
