



Ideal Theory as Fetishism

Jasper Friedrich, Politics, University of Oxford, UK,
jasper.friedrich@politics.ox.ac.uk

This paper revisits the debate on ideal and nonideal theory by taking seriously Charles Mills's suggestion that it should be understood as a dispute between idealism and materialism. I argue that by understanding different sides of the debate as relying on idealist or materialist assumptions, respectively, we can better make sense of disagreements where theorists otherwise seem to be talking past each other. In addition, I claim that the materialist objection to ideal theory is best understood as a fetishism critique in the Marxian sense: ideal theory treats products of human problem solving as if they had independent authority over us. To justify ideal theory, one needs to accord either normative or practical authority to ideal-as-idealized-models, and materialism denies both. Finally, I show that rejecting ideal theory does not entail reformism but is compatible with radical critique.



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JASPER FRIEDRICH
Politics, University of Oxford, UK

When Charles Mills published his now-classic article ‘“Ideal Theory” as Ideology’ in 2005, he noted that ‘the debate between ideal and nonideal theory can be seen as part of a larger and older historic philosophical dispute between idealism and materialism’.¹ This remark has largely gone unnoticed in subsequent debates about ideal theory. Instead, discussions have often been structured around much narrower questions of feasibility constraints,² path-dependence,³ or action-guidance.⁴ A recent, and much welcome, methodological rapprochement between critical theory and analytic political philosophy has widened the debate by established interesting connections between the ideal theory dispute and debates about utopianism,⁵ negativism,⁶ and immanent critique.⁷ Yet even critical theorists, who generally see themselves as part of the materialist tradition descended from Marx, have not explicitly reflected on how questions of ideal versus nonideal theorizing map onto the old distinction between idealism and materialism.⁸ In this article, I aim to show, first, that attending to the idealist or materialist assumptions of different sides in the ideal-nonideal dispute sheds new light on this long-standing debate and adds much-needed clarity to cases where authors otherwise appear to talk past one another. Second, I will articulate what I think is the most fundamental critique of ideal-theoretic methodology from a materialist perspective.

¹ Mills 2005, p. 181.

² Gheaus 2013; Hamlin and Stemplowska 2012, pp. 52–58; Valentini 2012, pp. 656–660; Wiens 2015.

³ Hamlin and Stemplowska 2012, pp. 58–59; Simmons 2010; Valentini 2012, pp. 660–662.

⁴ Anderson 2010, pp. 3–7; Estlund 2011b; Robeyns 2008; Stemplowska 2008; Swift 2008; Wiens 2015.

⁵ Böker 2017; Stahl 2025.

⁶ Hemmerich 2024; Lepold 2025; Stahl 2024a, pp. 169–172.

⁷ Stahl 2024a, pp. 172–175. For further engagements between critical theory and the ideal theory debate, see also Hänel 2025; Haslanger 2021; Sangiovanni 2025.

⁸ A recent *Routledge Handbook of Non-Ideal Theory* (Hänel and Müller 2025), with 34 chapters, many of which engage critical-theoretical traditions of philosophy, contains only a handful passing mentions of materialism.

Ideal theorists maintain that that ‘until the ideal is identified, at least in outline ... nonideal theory lacks an objective’.⁹ But this relies on a specific image of political action as aimed at realizing values and ideals which can be antecedently identified. Materialism denies just that image of political action and social change. As I will argue, for materialists, progressive social change is more like solving a problem than following a rule. We come up with ideals and values through our attempts to solve pressing political problems, like oppression, exploitation, and exclusion. These ideals are instrumentally valuable for us insofar as they help us address the problems we face, but they have no normative authority in themselves: reflection on ideals, abstracted from the real problems they were meant to solve, cannot tell us ‘what justice requires of us’.

Rather than ideology critique, this objection to the ideal-theoretic method is more precisely articulated as a fetishism critique.¹⁰ To criticize someone for fetishism, in the specific sense this concept has taken on in the Marxist tradition, is to accuse them of treating the result of human agency as having power or authority independently of that agency. Justifications for ideal theory, I will argue, rely on at least one of two forms of fetishism: metanormative or practical fetishism. To justify the ideal-theoretic method one needs to explain why political action is or should be guided by ideal models. This can be done by according these ideals normative authority (they tell us what would be right or wrong for us to do) or by according them practical authority (we are, in fact, motivated to act in accordance with these ideals). But materialism denies both. Metanormatively, materialists see normative principles and ideals as arising from our practical activity and lacking independent normative authority. And on the practical level, materialists claim that social change is not driven by ideals, but by political struggles grounded in material interests. Hence, from a materialist point of view, both strategies are fetishistic in that they accord undue authority to ideals.

The article begins by defining the ideal-theoretic method that is the target of my critique using Tommie Shelby’s recent engagement with Angela Davis’s work as an example of the differences between ideal-theoretic and materialist approaches (Section I). I then explain the structure of fetishism critique with reference to Marx and Feuerbach (Section II). Next, I show why, from a materialist point of view, the

⁹ Rawls 1999b, p. 90.

¹⁰ Depending on one’s theory of ideology, fetishism may well be understood as a kind of, or aspect of, ideology (as Marx arguably did). I do not mean to take any specific position on that question in this article. My argument is simply that the fetishism critique is a more precise way of pointing out the methodological problem with ideal theory than the type of ideology critique that has been levelled at it so far.

ideal-theoretic method relies on either metanormative fetishism (Section III) or practical fetishism (Section IV). Finally, I respond to the objection that, without ideal theory, we are left with incremental reformism of a kind incompatible with the radical political goals of many materialists (Section V).

Before beginning, let me clarify the scope of the article: I am not presenting any independent arguments for materialism or against idealism. By clarifying what I take to be the materialist disagreement with ideal theorists, I simply point out that arguments for ideal theory rely on idealist assumptions which usually go unarticulated. I aim not to solve the centuries-old debate between idealism and materialism, but to show that it is still relevant.

I. IDEAL THEORY AND THE AUTHORITY OF IDEAL MODELS

The label ‘ideal theory’ is applied in a number of different ways by different political theorists, so it is important to begin by clarifying my target. The term was first introduced by Rawls to describe a certain methodological move. To find out what justice requires of us here and now, we begin by constructing a theory of what justice would look like under ‘ideal’ circumstances. This involves abstracting away from a number of ‘nonideal’ features of the real world, such as non-compliance, in order to imagine what a fully just world would look like. Once we have this ideal theory in hand, we then proceed to ‘nonideal theory’, that is, theorizing about what ought to be done in our current context to move closer to the ideal. Some critics of ideal theory are simply criticizing Rawlsian philosophy for focusing too much on the first step to the (near-) exclusion of the second.¹¹ The target of my critique is wider: it is the ideal-theoretic method as a whole. As such the targets of my critique also include nonideal theorizing insofar as this is understood as derivative of ideal theory in accordance with the Rawlsian method. I will define this ideal-theoretic method as any approach to political theory that derives the normative and/or practical authority of its prescriptions wholly or in part from what Mills calls ‘ideal-as-idealized-models’.

To clarify this definition, let me introduce a concrete example of this method in use. Tommie Shelby’s recent book *The Idea of Prison Abolition* applies an ideal-theoretic method to interrogate the arguments of prison abolitionists, primarily Angela Davis.¹² I take Davis’s work to be a paradigm example of a materialist approach to political theory, and I will have more to say about her method later; for now, what matters is

¹¹ Robeyns 2008; Wolff 1998, p. 113.

¹² Davis 2003; Shelby 2022.

that she begins from the nonideal problem of mass imprisonment, analyses how the prison industrial complex is bound up with racism, capitalism, and patriarchy, and argues that attempts to reform prisons are insufficient, or even counterproductive. She does not rely on an ideal-theoretical account of justice to ground these arguments. Shelby recognizes the methodological differences between his approach and Davis's; he self-consciously subjects her materialist treatment of prisons to an interrogation using the 'tools of analytic philosophy' to test whether 'systematic moral arguments' can be developed in support of prison abolition.¹³ By 'systematic moral argumentation' he means 'ideal theory'.¹⁴ The assumption underlying the book is that the question of whether prisons should be abolished can be answered by asking whether 'the practice of imprisonment [could] ever be justified in a just social order'.¹⁵ His answer is 'yes'. Imagining a reasonably just society, he does not find that the moral principles governing such a society rule out any of the *necessary*, as opposed to merely *contingent*, features of the practice of imprisonment. Shelby thus constructs what Mills calls an 'ideal-as-idealized-model', that is, a model of what society *ought* to look like and the role of idealized prisons within that society, and from this he derives conclusions about what we should do here and now: reform, not abolition.

The details and cogency of Davis's and Shelby's arguments need not concern us here. I only want to point out their methodological differences, and key to these is the role of ideal models. Mills, importantly, distinguishes 'ideal-as-idealized-models' from other sense of 'ideal'.¹⁶ Sometimes 'idealization' is used to mean something like 'abstraction', or what Mills terms an 'ideal-as-descriptive-model'. This usage of the term 'ideal' owes its popularity in the social sciences to Max Weber's concept of 'ideal-typical constructs'.¹⁷ As Weber emphasizes, 'the idea of an ethical imperative, of a "model" of what "ought" to exist is to be carefully distinguished from the analytical construct, which is "ideal" in the strictly logical sense of the term'.¹⁸ Davis, for example, employs idealized models of capitalism, racism, and patriarchy to explain the role prisons play within these interlocking systems. These models play an important diagnostic role, but they are, of course, not models of what ought to be.

¹³ Shelby 2022, p. 12.

¹⁴ Shelby 2013; 2022, pp. 184–190.

¹⁵ Shelby 2022, p. 4.

¹⁶ Mills 2005, p. 166.

¹⁷ See Weber 1904, pp. 91ff.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 91–92.

This does not mean, however, that Davis's arguments are not normative or that she does not appeal to normative concepts like 'liberation' and 'oppression'. I take it to be uncontroversial that an argument about what should be done—e.g., that prisons should be abolished—is straightforwardly a normative one. As Mills acknowledges, all moral and political theory could be called 'ideal theory' in the 'trivial sense' of having to do 'with normative/prescriptive/evaluative issues, as against factual/descriptive issues, and so involv[ing] the appeal to values and ideals'.¹⁹ What differentiates Shelby from Davis, and what Mills (and I) object to, then, is not to the mere invocation of ideals but a specific methodological role that ideal theory accords to 'ideal-as-idealized-models' (for brevity, I will henceforth refer to these simply as 'ideal models').

So, what does the objection consist in? Mills's main criticism is that ideal theories of justice (or rights, or equality, etc.) are unhelpful and even ideological because they obscure the deep injustices, like patriarchy and white supremacy, that structure our societies, and which political theory ought to be concerned with countering. Now, *sometimes*, Mills recognizes, ideal models *can* be useful in helping us understand how a given object functions. When a mechanic deals with a car, it is helpful for them to have a model of how that car *should* function, and to treat any deviation from that ideal model as a shortfall which needs to be fixed. This is because the car was purposefully designed to function in a specific way, and its actual functioning, including any deviations from that ideal, are best understood in relation to how it was *meant to* function. If our societies had been designed by benevolent philosopher kings, the same method could plausibly be used to understand them and diagnose deviations from the ideal of justice. But Mills's point is that this does not apply to our social world. The world we live in and its social and political institutions are not designed in accordance with ideals of justice, of which they may occasionally fall short; rather, they are shaped by historical and ongoing injustice through and through.²⁰ To abstract away from the fact that existing societies function as systems of oppression and exploitation 'is not to make a simplifying assumption for theoretical purposes, but to repudiate theorizing them altogether'.²¹ As such, using ideal models is unlikely to help us understand the political problems we face or to help us remedy them.

Now, there is a straightforward reply to this criticism that defenders of ideal theory often make. Mills simply misunderstands the methodological role that ideal models are supposed to play in normative theorizing, one might argue. For the point of ideal

¹⁹ Mills 2005, p. 166.

²⁰ See also Mills 1997; 2015.

²¹ Mills 2015, p. 15.

models plainly is not to help us understand the world as it is, but to help us understand the world as it *ought to be*. Ideal theorists can easily concede the need for more nonideal theorizing to understand the injustices we currently face but insist on the need for this endeavour to be guided by an understanding of what an ideal society would look like. One can admit that ‘political theorists have already made extensive use of ideal theory while neglecting nonideal theory’, but this is not the same as ‘questioning the purpose of ideal theory as such’, argue Stemplowska and Swift. After all, ‘[w]e need to know the goal before we can form an all-things-considered evaluation of transitional steps in its direction’.²² Shelby, for example, largely takes on board Davis’s nonideal analysis of the role prisons actually play within existing racist and capitalist social structures. But he adds to this an ideal-theoretic account of the role prisons *should* play in a just society; an account that supplies ‘goals to work toward’ and ‘normative standards for judging the overall justice of social arrangements’.²³ What could be wrong with theorizing the ideal we want to achieve *alongside* theorizing the nonideal circumstances we are confronting?

It may seem that Mills and the ideal theorists are simply talking past each other; Mills appears to be criticizing ideal models for failing to do something they were never meant to do. But I would caution against this conclusion. While Mills (regrettably) does not make it explicit, I think his critique should be read as challenging the core methodological claim that ‘until the ideal is identified, at least in outline ... nonideal theory lacks an objective’.²⁴ Now, defendants of this claim sometimes make the argument from path-dependence: if we do not know what our aim is, then even a step that appears as an immediate improvement may make that aim less accessible.²⁵ This is undeniably true.²⁶ We should be clear about what we want to achieve both in the long and short term in order to make informed decisions about which actions to take here and now. But the suppressed premise in this argument is that the (long-term) aims of political action are supplied by ideal models—and *this*, I will argue, is the claim that materialists call into question.

To justify the claim that ideal models furnish long-term aims for social change, ideal theorists must explain why such models have normative and/or practical authority for

²² Stemplowska and Swift 2012, p. 386. See also: Shelby 2013, pp. 152–53; Simmons 2010.

²³ Shelby 2013, p. 150. (emphasis original).

²⁴ Rawls 1999b, p. 90.

²⁵ Simmons 2010.

²⁶ Though the significance of this claim remains an important matter of dispute. I set those debates aside for the purposes of this article, but see: Barrett 2023; Sen 2006.

us. I borrow these notions from Rachel Fraser. If you want to claim normative authority for the principles (or ideal models) you employ, she points out, ‘you must say what distinguishes principles [or models] with normative authority from those without’: why would it be *wrong* for society to deviate from your model of ideal justice?²⁷ To claim normative authority for ideal models is to make a *metanormative claim*, a claim about where normativity comes from. It need not include any claims about whether the ideal serves any practically useful role. On the other hand, ‘[a] principle has *practical* authority for an agent or group just so long as that agent or group is disposed to take the *mere fact* that some course of action would be to act in accordance with the principle as a (*pro tanto*) reason to so act’.²⁸ Thus, an ideal model has practical authority for us, if we take it as providing *pro tanto* reasons to make society more like that model. The claim to practical authority is logically independent of the metanormative claim,²⁹ but to justify the ideal-theoretic method one needs to make at least one of these. To say that without an ideal model we ‘lack an objective’ requires explaining why ideal models authoritatively provide such objectives.

If we want to properly understand the core of the disagreement between ideal theorists and their materialist critics, we need to understand it as a dispute about the authority of ideal models. Hence, to fix the target of my critique, I here define ideal theory as any method that accords normative and/or practical authority to ideal models. My argument will be that, from a materialist point of view, theories that accord such authority to ideal models are guilty of a methodological self-understanding best described as fetishism. To be clear, while I think this materialist re-interpretation of the critique of ideal theory helps us make better sense of aspects of Mills’s classic critique, the arguments in this article are not meant as an exegetical account of his work; it is, rather, an independent attempt to take up his intriguing, but underdeveloped, suggestion that the critique of ideal theory is a version of the materialist critique of idealism.³⁰

²⁷ Fraser 2023, p. 98.

²⁸ *Ibid.* (emphasis modified).

²⁹ The late Rawls (1985) can plausibly be read as according practical authority to ideal models while staying neutral on their normative authority. Estlund (2011a), on the other hand, argues that ideal models can have normative authority without practical authority.

³⁰ I do believe that the account I develop here is the best way of making sense of Mills’s arguments in ‘“Ideal Theory” as Ideology’, but his wider oeuvre arguably contains contradictory tendencies. To what extent the materialist critique of ideal theory is compatible with Mills’s (2007) own modified employment of the Rawlsian original position, for example, is an open question.

II. THE FETISHISM CRITIQUE

Before going on with my critique of ideal theory, let me explain what I mean by the term ‘fetishism’ here. The term has occasionally been mentioned casually in critiques of idealized theorizing.³¹ Onora O’Neill, for example, mentions that ethical theorizing based on abstract principles has been blamed for making a ‘fetish of rules’, by which she simply means a kind of ‘ethical rigorism’ or ‘superstitious rule worship’.³² While acknowledging that some philosophers advocate ‘over-rigid reliance on certain rules’, she does not take this to seriously challenge the claim that ‘any plausible view of reasoning about conduct must give principles and rules an important role’.³³ My argument will be that the charge of fetishism, once understood more precisely, has more mileage than that.

In short, fetishism, in the sense I shall be using it, means to treat what is the result of human agency as having power independently of that agency. Marx’s famous analysis of commodity fetishism follows this structure: the commodity is *really* the result of human labour and has value qua embodiment of human labour;³⁴ but it is treated fetishistically as having value in and of itself, while human labour appears valuable only because it produces commodities.³⁵ The way we expend our productive capacities, under a system of commodity production, therefore falsely seems to us to be *determined* by the values of commodities set by the ‘natural’ laws of exchange; the latter are invested with power *over* the organization of human labour, rather than being recognized as results thereof.³⁶ For commodity producers, Marx writes, ‘their own social movement has the form of the movement of things, which, rather than controlling, they are controlled by’.³⁷ It is important to be clear about what exactly is *false* about commodity fetishism.

³¹ See passing mentions in: Geuss 2008, p. 16; Mills 2005, p. 175.

³² O’Neill 1987, p. 60.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 60, 64. Interestingly, Mills (2005, pp. 165–66) claims, in his introduction, that his critique of idealization builds on O’Neill’s. This is somewhat odd, since O’Neill’s article defends a very traditional approach to ethical theory centred on abstract normative principles. In any case, Mills never mentions O’Neill again after the introduction, nor does he engage with her arguments.

³⁴ ‘[L]abor products, insofar as they are values, are merely thingly expressions of the human labor expended to produce them’ (Marx 1867, p. 51). Note, though, that an object’s being the result of human labour is necessary, but not sufficient, for it to have value in Marx’s sense; it also needs to have some use-value for its value to be realizable via market exchange.

³⁵ Cohen 1978, p. 120; Marx 1867, pp. 47–59.

³⁶ Marx 1867, p. 569

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

It is not false, on the Marxist analysis, that we are all subject to the ‘mute compulsion’ of capital—in a sense, we really *are* subject to the laws of commodity production.³⁸ These laws, though, are not immutable but themselves results of social activity; it is the treatment of these historically specific relations of production as ‘self-evident natural necessity’ that is fetishistic.³⁹

Commodities are real physical things, but the objects of fetishism can also be ideas. Marx, in fact, largely based his criticism of commodity fetishism on an analogy with ‘the misty place that is the religious world, where things produced by the human mind seem endowed with lives of their own’.⁴⁰ Here, he was referring mainly to Ludwig Feuerbach’s critique of Christianity. God, thus Feuerbach charged, was simply an idea created by humans which Christians fetishistically treated as if it had authority over us. In fact, in the image of an all-powerful, benevolent God, Christians were, unbeknownst to themselves, worshipping human qualities projected onto a supernatural being. The fetishistic inversion here lies in a misunderstanding of the source of the qualities we value: ‘The fact is not that a quality is divine because God has it, but that God has it because it is in itself divine’.⁴¹ In other words, we believe that we value, say, benevolence, because God has this quality; when, in fact, we have attributed this quality to God because we already value it.

To level the charge of fetishism, then, is to accuse someone of a self-misunderstanding. In both Marx and Feuerbach, the outcome of human activity, the commodity or God, is treated as having independent existence and power over our actions. In both cases there is also an inversion of the source of value: we fetishistically believe our actions to be valuable *because* they produce exchange-value, or *because* they accord with divine qualities; when, in fact, both commodities and God derive their value from human activity. In the same way, I will argue, the ideal-theoretic method treats the outcome of a process of problem-solving as if it were an independent source of authority; it proceeds as if actions are valuable *because* they bring us closer to an ideal when, in fact, the ideal is valuable only insofar as it helps us solve practical problems. Needless to say, one need not agree with Marx’s or Feuerbach’s specific claims about capitalism and religion to follow the rest of my argument—my appeal to these two authors has been purely to clarify the structure of the fetishism critique.

³⁸ Mau 2023.

³⁹ Marx 1867, p. 57.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁴¹ Feuerbach 1841, p. 21.

III. IDEAL THEORY: IDEOLOGY OR FETISHISM?

Let me now return to the question raised in Section I: are critics and defenders of ideal theory talking past each other, or is there a real methodological disagreement? I argue, in this section, that we can better make sense of the dispute between Mills and ideal theorists if we see that each side (implicitly or explicitly) relies on different metanormative assumptions. Mills is a materialist, and (most) defenders of ideal theory are idealists. From a materialist perspective, the mistake involved in ideal-theoretic methodology is not that it is necessarily ideological (though it may often be), but that it relies on *metanormative fetishism* when it accords normative authority to ideal models.

Let me begin by distinguishing this fetishism critique from some related criticisms of ideal theory. I have already mentioned above that some critics mainly object to the *exclusive* focus on ideal theory. Others, however, have gone further and argued that ideal theory is unnecessary, or even useless, for the practice of political theory.⁴² Another set of criticisms has to do with whether we can reliably know the ideal. This claim has been made in a Hayekian vein arguing that societies involve too much complexity for us to reliably know which institutional designs produce the best outcomes.⁴³ It has also been made in an Adornian way by critical theorists who worry that existing capitalist societies distort our understanding of the Good such that we cannot reliably theorize it.⁴⁴ Both critiques can plausibly be attributed to Mills too. Some have understood him to say that ideal theorizing is useless in countering injustice, and that the endeavour is ideological because it ‘generates opportunity costs by crowding out other theories’.⁴⁵ Others have highlighted his claim that ‘hegemonic ideologies and group-specific experience ... distort[] our perceptions and conceptions’, meaning that the ideals we come up with will be tainted.⁴⁶

Neither version of the critique is, I believe, particularly strong on its own. To the criticism from opportunity costs, ideal theorists can, as we have seen, easily respond by conceding the need for more nonideal theory; their deeper methodological claims about the role of ideals in normative theory seem untouched by this critique. To the argument from epistemic limitations, the obvious retort is that this is not a problem for ideal theory in any special sense: if our thinking about ideal justice is seriously

⁴² Barrett 2023; Sen 2006; 2009.

⁴³ Barrett 2019.

⁴⁴ Freyenhagen 2013; Stahl 2024a, pp. 169–172. Cf. also Adorno 1963, p. 175.

⁴⁵ Stahl 2024b, p. 145. See also: Adams 2021, p. 681; Stemplowska and Swift 2012, p. 378.

⁴⁶ Mills 2005, p. 169. See Hänel and Müller 2022; Stahl 2024a, 170–71.

distorted, then why would our theorizing about *injustice* be any less distorted?⁴⁷ If these distortions, as critical theorists usually claim, can be remedied by incorporating a reflexive metatheory about how one's social position shapes one's cognition,⁴⁸ then why can the same method not be used to develop a kind of 'standpoint-theoretically informed ideal theory'?⁴⁹

The fetishism critique, on the other hand, denies that ideal theory can help us 'discover what justice requires of us',⁵⁰ even in principle. This is not the same as saying that the ideal is epistemically inaccessible. Even if those epistemic worries run deep, they are contingent and could be overcome at least in theory. Nor am I merely saying that ideal-theoretic work is pointless. Let us grant, for the sake of argument, that the value of political theory does not depend on its being practically useful.⁵¹ My claim is that the ideal-theoretical method is misguided because it relies on wrong assumptions about the status of ideals in the making of normative judgments. What we have is a metanormative disagreement.

Recall the ideal-theoretic reply to Mills: Our normative judgments about the world require appeal to some principles and, if this is so, then it is surely useful to model what an ideal society looks like according to those principles. Stemplowska and Swift, for example, state that 'one cannot develop concrete proposals without the philosophy—the theory of ideals—to identify the principles that should inform them'.⁵² Elsewhere Erik Olin Wright states that behind every critique, 'there is an implicit theory of justice, some conception of what conditions would have to be met before the institutions of a society could be deemed just'.⁵³ Neither author provides any argument in favour of these claims; they are simply stated as if they were obvious. But they are not, in fact, obvious. The claim that our normative judgments derive their authority from a set of

⁴⁷ Hemmerich 2024, p. 111.

⁴⁸ Hänel and Müller 2022; Mills 2005, p. 174.

⁴⁹ Stahl 2024a, p. 171. Mills (2005, p. 178) himself seems to answer this question by claiming that such a theory would, by definition, no longer be ideal theory, since the metatheory requires appeal to the nonideal. On my definition of ideal theory, I cannot help myself to such arguments, since a standpoint-theoretically informed ideal theory can clearly accord normative authority to ideal models.

⁵⁰ Freeman 2012, p. 186.

⁵¹ Estlund 2011b.

⁵² Stemplowska and Swift 2012, p. 386.

⁵³ Wright 2010, p. 12. See also Shelby 2013, p. 153.

principles that specify what a just world would look like is a specific metanormative view in need of justification.

Specifically, it is a Kantian understanding of moral norms which sharply distinguishes moral philosophy from practical activity and subordinates the latter to the former. For Kant, we have to seek ‘the ground of obligation ... not in the nature of the human being or the circumstances of the world in which he is placed, but *a priori* solely in concepts of pure reason’. He makes a strict categorical distinction within practical cognition between moral philosophy, resting ‘entirely on its pure part’, and ‘everything else in which there is anything empirical’.⁵⁴ While we inevitably have to act in a material world and take its constraints into account when designing our actions, the source of normativity cannot be found in this world; normative authority emanates from a moral law belonging to a non-material realm.⁵⁵ From this metanormative view, the ideal-theoretic methodology follows quite straightforwardly: if the aim of political action is to make our world conform to the principles provided by pure reason, then it seems advisable to start by modelling the kinds of political institutions that *would* realize these principles. The ideal model has normative authority because it realizes authoritative moral principles. All else being equal, it would be *right* to move closer to that ideal and *wrong* to move further away from it.

Materialism denies this image of normativity.⁵⁶ This is not just because moral theorizing is always ‘shaped by social structures, by “material” social privilege and disadvantage’ and therefore never ‘pure’.⁵⁷ It is also, and more fundamentally, because all cognitive activity is part and parcel of our interaction with the material environment. In sharp contradistinction to the Kantian dualism of the material and the moral, Marx and Engels write in *The German Ideology* that ‘[t]he production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the

⁵⁴ Kant 1785, p. 5. This brief statement, of course, does not do justice to Kant’s complex philosophical system. I introduce it only to highlight a certain metanormative assumption underlying much contemporary normative theory, not as an exhaustive description of the philosophy of Kant or Kantians. In fact, as I will discuss in section IV, contemporary Kantians, like Rawls, have explicitly rejected this dualism while maintaining other aspects of Kant’s philosophy.

⁵⁵ For a similar account of ‘political moralism’ as relying on this type of dualism, see Queloz 2024. Cf. also Williams 2005, p. 12.

⁵⁶ For a detailed argument to this effect, see Wills 2024, pp. 169–170, 177–194.

⁵⁷ Mills 2005, pp. 181–82.

material intercourse of men—the language of real life’.⁵⁸ Normative thought is no exception: it cannot be understood apart from our material, embodied interaction with our environment.

I do not here want to wade into the extensive debates about the sources of normativity in the (materialist) literature on social critique⁵⁹ or the debates about Marx and normativity.⁶⁰ For my purposes, let me just say that I think normativity is best thought of as arising from our experience of the world as problematic. Iris Marion Young writes:

Desire, the desire to be happy, creates the distance, the negation, that opens the space for criticism of what is. This critical distance does not occur on the basis of some previously discovered rational ideas of the good and the just. On the contrary, the ideas of the good and the just arise from the desiring negation that action brings to what is given.⁶¹

Our ideas of a better society are not derived from rational principles but arise as potential solutions to overcome our dissatisfaction with the world. Appeals to ideals are, as Finlayson puts it, ‘shorthand for demands’ for change.⁶² The source of normativity is not these ideals themselves, but *here in this* material world in the pressing problems of subordination, exploitation, oppression that we face.

Or take Angela Davis’s thought as an example. As mentioned above, her arguments for prison abolition do not rely on an ideal model of justice, but this does not mean that she never appeals to ideals or values. Normative concepts like liberation and oppression are pervasive in her work. Yet, she does not derive the normative force of her arguments from an ideal model of liberation, but rather sees value in such normative concepts only insofar as they help us respond to the problems we face: ‘if the theory of freedom remains isolated from the practice of freedom or rather is contradicted in reality, then this means that something must be wrong with the concept’.⁶³ We cannot, on her view, consult an ideal theory of justice to find out whether prisons are compatible

⁵⁸ Marx and Engels 1846, p. 42. For further discussion and the clarification that this view does not entail a determinist or reductionist view of practice, see Öner 2025, pp. 1198–1202.

⁵⁹ Haslanger 2021; Jaeggi 2018.

⁶⁰ Leiter 2015; Wills 2024.

⁶¹ Young 1990, p. 6.

⁶² Finlayson 2020, p. 129.

⁶³ Davis 1970, p. 110.

with freedom. Rather, concepts like ‘freedom’ and ‘liberation’ are ways of articulating problems and demands for change.⁶⁴

Note that seeing normative thought as part of our interaction with the world is not the same as instrumentally *subordinating* theory to action. David Estlund has defended the value of highly idealized and ‘hopeless’ political theory on the straightforward grounds that ‘[u]nderstanding justice is important whether or not that understanding promotes justice or anything else valuable, because it is the understanding of something which is, in itself, important’.⁶⁵ But this works as a defence of ideal theory only on the assumption that ‘justice’ is the kind of thing we can understand by abstracting away from the real world until only pristine pure reason remains. If our normative concepts, like ‘justice’, are responses to problems in the real world, then understanding the concept of justice and its value for us, requires investigating the context that gave rise to it and its role in political struggles; in other words, genealogy rather than ideal theory. This inquiry—and here I agree with Estlund—does not depend for its value on being immediately useful to political action. Critical theorists, like Adorno, have notably been scathing about the demand ‘that every idea should immediately produce its own legitimating document explaining its own practical use’. Sometimes, instead, we need to ‘resist the call of practicality with all our might in order ruthlessly to follow through an idea and its logical implications so as to see where it may lead.’⁶⁶ Nevertheless, Adorno does not believe that ‘following through an idea’ can be done in abstraction from understanding its role in practice, because ‘[i]n its origins thinking is no more than the form in which we have attempted to master our environment and come to terms with it’.⁶⁷ Any attempt to unmoor the idea from practice means misunderstanding it.

If this is true, then the ideal-theoretic method is fetishistic. Recall Feuerbach: ‘The fact is not that a quality is divine because God has it, but that God has it because it

⁶⁴ This way of thinking about normative concepts is not that different from how some Kantians think about them. Thus, Korsgaard (2003, pp. 116, 114.) argues that ‘normative concepts are ... the names of the solutions of problems, problems to which we give names to mark them out as objects for practical thought’. The difference between her view and a materialist one is that she accepts a Kantian account of what the problems of practical philosophy consist in: namely that an ‘entirely free will’ must be undetermined by any material factors and therefore needs to find normative principles in the realm of pure reason. In the next section, we will explore Rawls’s version of this Kantian constructivism which rejects Kant’s dualism and is therefore arguably compatible with a materialist account of normativity, but instead, so I will argue, relies on an idealist social theory.

⁶⁵ Estlund 2011b, p. 414.

⁶⁶ Adorno 1963, p. 4.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

is in itself divine'.⁶⁸ We can say much the same of ideal theory: the fact is not that a certain action is worth pursuing because it brings us closer to the ideal, but that we have projected it onto that ideal because it is worth pursuing. The dissatisfaction with how things are leads people to articulate demands for change and sometimes even to come up with utopian ideas for radically different societies that will eradicate the sources of their unhappiness (I return to the difference between utopianism and ideal theory below). Ideal theorists then take ideals articulated as part of these struggles, like 'justice' or 'equality', and hypostatize them. They treat them in abstraction from the problems they were originally meant to solve and develop ideal models which are meant to tell us what justice 'requires of us'—even, according to some, if those requirements cannot realistically be fulfilled by any human society.⁶⁹ As such they have taken the products of our own creative efforts to come up with solutions to social problems and fetishistically invested them with normative authority over human action. Normative theorizing, no matter how specialized, abstract, and distant from real politics, is always still a part of the material world and it makes use of concepts which make sense only as part of our collective interaction with this world, part of 'the language of real life'. When theorists deny this, they are guilty of self-misunderstanding.

Thus, the fundamental methodological challenge that materialism poses to ideal theory is best understood as fetishism critique, not ideology critique. At least in the way authors like Mills and Stahl have levelled it, the ideology critique of ideal theory entails accusing it of 'stabilizing prevailing relations of power' because it occludes pressing injustices, like patriarchy and racism.⁷⁰ This is true of much ideal theory. But the same can be said for a lot of nonideal theory; for example, when it uncritically takes contingent features of our actual societies as immutable 'feasibility constraints' or accepts 'whitewashed' epistemological frameworks.⁷¹ If we want to criticize ideal theory as a method, we need to pinpoint the methodological mistake it makes, rather than just point to its unsatisfactory outcomes.

The fetishism critique is not incompatible with ideology critique, however. In fact, it helps us see more clearly *why* many versions of ideal theory may be ideological. The fetishistic treatment of ideals tends to make us treat contingent historical ideas, which are products of colonial, racist, and patriarchal societies, as if they were universally

⁶⁸ Feuerbach 1841, p. 21.

⁶⁹ Estlund 2011a; Stemplowska and Swift 2012, p. 387.

⁷⁰ Stahl 2024b, p. 136. I am not committed to this definition of ideology, though. On a broader conception of ideology, fetishism may well be understood as an aspect of ideology.

⁷¹ Adams 2021; Ruíz and Berenstain 2025; Walters 2025.

valid. But it is not clear that this is *necessarily* the case whenever we do ideal theory. A feminist theorist may well come up with a highly idealized theory which tells us, say, that, based on some abstract understanding of the ideal of autonomy, ideal justice requires the abolition of gender.⁷² Such a theory would rely on the same methodological self-misunderstanding as any other ideal theory; but it does not seem to stabilize existing relations of power.⁷³

I have not here presented arguments in favour of a materialist approach to political theory—that is not my aim in this article. The point of this section has been to clarify what I see as the deep (and usually unarticulated) methodological differences between ideal-theoretic and materialist theorizing. The fact that both sides in the debate have generally left their metanormative commitments unarticulated has led to a situation where detractors and defenders of ideal theory seem to talk past each other. Stemplowska, for example, simply ‘find[s] it hard to imagine that anyone might object to such [ideal] theorizing’.⁷⁴ Lorna Finlayson, meanwhile, laments the ‘profound and frustrating difficulty’ of expressing objections to that approach in ways that are not simply dismissed as missing the point by mainstream philosophers.⁷⁵ In the first place, my argument is that being explicit about metanormative assumptions would clarify such frustrating misunderstandings. The fetishism critique presupposes a materialist metanormative theory, and, as such, ideal theorists who are willing to defend metanormative idealism need not be troubled by it.

But my sense is that many ideal theorists will be, or should be, somewhat troubled nevertheless. This is because they have often been reluctant to make the defence of their methods conditional on accepting controversial metanormative views. In fact, Rawls, at least in his later work, explicitly emphasized the metaethical neutrality of his theory

⁷² E.g., Vedder (2026) idealizes away from patriarchal oppression to argue that compulsory sex marking would conflict with the ideal of autonomy even under those idealized conditions.

⁷³ Stahl (2024b, p. 155) argues that ideal theory’s understanding of concepts like ‘justice’ as ‘semantically practice-independent’, rather than embedded within our practical attempts to change the social world, is ideological because it ‘rule[s] out practical interest-based challenges to these concepts from politically excluded or subordinated groups’. I do not see why it necessarily does. It may be more difficult because such challenges need to be translated into the ‘practice-independent’ language of ideal theory, but, as the example of feminist ideal theory shows (cf., again, Vedder 2026), this is not impossible. Ideal theory may, due to its fetishistic nature, be more likely to become ideological, but the method itself is not *necessarily* ideological.

⁷⁴ Stemplowska 2008, p. 330.

⁷⁵ Finlayson 2020, p. 128.

of justice. The next section therefore asks if there is any way for someone like Rawls to defend an ideal-theoretic method without idealist metanormative commitments.

IV. IDEAL THEORY AS PROBLEM-SOLVING?

Rawls notably insisted that his method was compatible with a wide range of metaphysical views, including materialism.⁷⁶ So, can we make space for ideal-theoretic methods within a materialist political theory? The fact that ideal models do not have independent normative authority does not establish that they have *no* authority. Many human artifacts, including governments and social norms, have *practical* authority for us. Thus, ideal theorists may argue that, whatever the metaethical status of ideal models, we inevitably act politically on the basis of our ideals, and hence political theory should be in the business of supplying coherent models of those ideals that can guide our actions. This, however, is idealism in the familiar sense of assuming that ideas determine our actions. While avoiding metanormative fetishism, I will argue that it is guilty of *practical fetishism* by according ideal models undue practical authority.

Rawls, at least in his later work, not only claims metaphysical neutrality for his theory, but also explicitly understands it as an attempt to solve a pressing political problem.⁷⁷ His ideal theory, he claims, is from the very start determined by ‘the practical purposes and social role that a conception of social justice must fulfill’.⁷⁸ The problem for members of a liberal society, according to Korsgaard’s interpretation of Rawls, ‘is what we might call the distribution problem: people join together in a cooperative scheme because it will be better for all of them, but they must decide how its benefits and burdens are to be distributed’.⁷⁹ Solving this problem is complicated by the fact that, despite all participating in one cooperative scheme, we do not share any substantive conception of the Good which could ground agreement on principles of justice. Hence, for Rawls, the role that a liberal theory of justice is supposed to fulfil is ‘to serve as a shared point of view among citizens with opposing religions, philosophical and moral convictions, as well as diverse conceptions of the good’.⁸⁰ In other words, it is a

⁷⁶ Rawls 1985. In a footnote, Rawls (1985, p. 240, n. 22) explains that if his conception of justice relies on any metaphysical assumptions, they are so general as to be compatible with a wide range of philosophical views, including ‘Cartesian, Leibnizian, or Kantian; realist, idealist, or materialist’.

⁷⁷ See also Korsgaard 2003, pp. 112ff.

⁷⁸ Rawls 1980, p. 543.

⁷⁹ Korsgaard 2003, pp. 115–16.

⁸⁰ Rawls 1980, pp. 542–43.

practical solution to what Rawls saw as the pressing political problem of the day: that citizens in modern liberal democracies hold a plurality of worldviews but nevertheless need to agree on the basic constitutional principles regulating the basic structure of their societies.

On this view, ideal models are not, in themselves, invested with any normative authority; rather, following Korsgaard's interpretation again:

The normative force of the conception [of justice] is established in this way. If you recognize the problem to be real, to be yours, to be one you have to solve, and the solution to be the only or the best one, then the solution is binding upon you.⁸¹

Justified in this way, ideal theory clearly does not fall foul of metanormative fetishism. Instead of having normative authority of their own, judgments about ideal justice can be 'treated as modes of public contestation whose point is to reform, sustain, and replace specific normative orders and social structures'.⁸² Sangiovanni goes as far as claiming that, once understood in this way, we can 'think about even the most ideal forms of social and political philosophy as critical theories' which are '*emancipatory, embedded, diagnostic, and self-reflexive*'.⁸³

I would caution against such a hasty reconciliation, however. For, once we accept that the validity of ideal theorizing depends on its ability to solve actual political problems, that 'the ideal component of the theories would be assessed by their nonideal functions, rather than the other way around',⁸⁴ one actually needs to make empirically grounded arguments for ideal theory as a useful form of practical problem-solving. Defenders of ideal theory can no longer help themselves to the claim that 'until the ideal is identified, ... nonideal theory lacks an objective',⁸⁵ since the objective is now acknowledged to be provided by the nonideal function we want the theory to serve. And once this priority of the nonideal over the ideal is acknowledged, Mills's original criticism returns with full force.

Recall that Mills criticized ideal models for not helping us understand present injustices—a criticism that puzzled some ideal theorists since, they argued, ideal models are not meant to help us understand what *is* but what *ought to be*. But if normative

⁸¹ Korsgaard 2003, p. 116.

⁸² Sangiovanni 2025, p. 52.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 50 (emphasis original).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Rawls 1999b, p. 90.

theorizing is meant to provide solutions to practical problems then it plainly *does* matter that we have a good understanding of the problems we want to solve. Mills's point is that abstract reflection on ideals and principles simply *is not* an appropriate response to the political problems we face. In fact, ideal theory misconceives the problem: the idea that our societies are 'cooperative ventures for mutual advantage' which simply stand in need of mutually agreeable principles of justice is an assumption 'so directly contrary to reality, so centrally distortional of the essential defining features of the phenomenon in question, that they guarantee that a theoretical grasp of it will never be achieved'.⁸⁶ The belief that the remedy for injustice lies in perfecting our conception of ideal justice, arguably, seems plausible only from the perspective of those whose social position already make the world appear as 'nearly just'.⁸⁷ Once we take into account deeply entrenched power structures of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalist exploitation, it looks implausible to claim that the problem is that we just have not yet found a suitable conception of justice for everyone to agree on; that 'it is just a matter of coming up with better arguments'.⁸⁸

While Rawls's justification of the ideal-theoretic method, then, was an eminently practical one, it is telling that later ideal theorists have tended to respond to critiques like Mills's by conceding that ideal theory may serve no practical use but that it is still valuable theoretical work.⁸⁹ If we read Mills as presupposing a materialist metanormative framework, then his critique has a lot more bite. And it has bite against Rawls, in particular, because he was explicitly committed to a pragmatic form of political theory that does not rely on metaphysical assumptions. Unfortunately, Mills did not make this explicit, which has allowed his opponents to dismiss his critique too easily.

These criticisms can, again, be redescribed as a form of fetishism critique—but this time at the level of social, rather than metanormative, theory. For Rawls's 'political' conception, while not investing ideal principles of justice with independent *normative* authority, does bestow *practical* authority on them. In conceiving of the fundamental problem of political theory as one of disagreement over principles of justice, Rawls relies on an idealist social ontology where our ideas determine political practice, and what stands between us and justice is simply a better theory of justice.

Materialism, as a social theory, however, claims that this is precisely not how social change happens. The claim that social change is not driven by ideals has often been

⁸⁶ Mills 2015, p. 14.

⁸⁷ Rawls 1999a, p. 293.

⁸⁸ Mills 2005, p. 182.

⁸⁹ Estlund 2008, p. 14; Stemplowska 2008.

interpreted as crude economic determinism that assigns ideas a merely epiphenomenal role in the superstructure.⁹⁰ On this view, however, not only ideal theory, but *all* theory, would be pointless. A more plausible version of historical materialism recognizes that ideas play an important role—‘theory, too, becomes a material force once it seizes the masses’, said Marx⁹¹—but denies that ideals have practical authority qua ideals. Recall that ‘[a] principle has *practical* authority for an agent or group just so long as that agent or group is disposed to take the *mere fact* that some course of action would be to act in accordance with the principle as a (*pro tanto*) reason to so act’.⁹² Rawls assumes that citizens act politically mainly on the basis of their conceptions of justice; hence, the role of political theory is to show them what ought to follow from the principles that already have practical authority for them. On a materialist view, though, ideal models have no such authority. Ideals, like justice and equality, may *inspire* us to act, they may help us *imagine* political alternatives, and they may *embody practical solutions* to political problems. Thus, they are not epiphenomenal. But it is not the mere fact that an action brings us closer to an ideal that motivates political actors. What motivates action is the need to overcome oppression, which is why materialist theories locate the agency for progressive social change among those who have a material interest in it, i.e., those currently oppressed.

Marx and Engels accused the utopian socialists of their time of wishful thinking in supposing that ‘[h]istorical action [would] yield to their personal inventive action, historically created conditions of emancipation to fantastic ones’.⁹³ Rawls’s idea that political theory can motivate social change by providing the most reasonable theory of justice faces the same accusation. From a Marxist point of view, the notion that our ideals have such independent power is fetishistic. Even if it does not accord undue normative authority to ideals, it still accords a practical authority to them that they do not, in fact, have. This is, of course, a disputed social-theoretical claim; I do not pretend that it is obvious, nor can I defend it in detail here. My point is, again, just to clarify the nature of the materialist critique of ideal theory. The upshot is this: ideal theorists need to *either* admit that their method relies on controversial idealist metanormative commitments, *or* they need to provide empirically grounded social-theoretical arguments for why ideal theory in fact has a crucial practical role to play in politics.

⁹⁰ For a defence of such a deterministic theory, see Cohen (1978).

⁹¹ Marx 1844, p. 137.

⁹² Fraser 2023, p. 98 (emphasis modified).

⁹³ Marx and Engels 1848, p. 47.

V. DISTINGUISHING IDEAL THEORY FROM LONG-TERM AIMS

Before concluding, let me anticipate one possible objection to or misunderstanding of my arguments. Opposition to ideal theory is, regrettably, often conflated with opposition to long-term, radical, political goals. Jordan Walters, for example, has argued that ‘nonideal theory is ideological in virtue of the fact that it rules out more radical utopian ways of theorizing by methodological fiat’.⁹⁴ Simmons, similarly, claims that without ideal theory we ‘allow irrational free rein to the mere conviction of injustice and to eagerness for change of any sort’.⁹⁵ However, the methodological critique of ideal theory as fetishism by no means implies that we should not think about long-term political goals, or that political theorists have no role to play in articulating such goals. Let me explain.

The methodological question of whether we begin from the ideal or from the problem we want to solve is perpendicular to the question of whether we want to be reformists or utopians. Clearly an ideal model *can* be radical and utopian to the point of being, in Estlund’s words, ‘hopeless’.⁹⁶ But other ideal theories, especially practice-dependent ones, may build ideal models that (too) closely resemble the actual world and therefore not be radical at all. Rawls’s theory of justice has been accused of this fault in assuming (and naturalizing), *inter alia*, the existence of nation states,⁹⁷ the bourgeois family,⁹⁸ and market incentives.⁹⁹ Equally, non-idealizing approaches *can* be reformist by focusing on ‘realistic’ policy solutions that can be implemented here and now without fundamentally changing society.¹⁰⁰ But they need not be. A materialist political theory starts with the problems to be overcome, and what determines whether the resulting theory is reformist or radical is whether the problems identified are seen as surface-level or deeply entrenched. Mills himself identified global white supremacy as a fundamental obstacle to emancipation¹⁰¹—hardly something that can be addressed with reformist policy fixes! Equally, Marx rejected any philosophy that imposes ideal blueprints on society, but in diagnosing the root cause of the proletariat’s suffering as a necessary outcome of our mode of production, he made it clear that nothing short of

⁹⁴ Walters 2025, p. 75.

⁹⁵ Simmons 2010, p. 34.

⁹⁶ Estlund 2008, p. 14.

⁹⁷ Mills 2015.

⁹⁸ Okin 1989.

⁹⁹ Cohen 2008, ch. 1; Macpherson 1973.

¹⁰⁰ For a critique of the move from realism to reformism, see Finlayson 2017.

¹⁰¹ Mills 1997.

a revolution would solve the problem. It is deeply unfortunate that the idea of ‘problem solving’ has, in the literature on ideal and nonideal theory, become synonymous with ‘a relatively narrow and short-term perspective, aiming to identify “remediable injustices.”’¹⁰² In terms of philosophical methodology, there is no deep difference between proposing a policy fix to a technical problem or proposing a complete reorganization of society.¹⁰³ Neither accords independent normative or practical authority to the proposed solution—whether we want to pursue it depends on whether we think it will solve our problem.

The example of Tommie Shelby and Angela Davis on prison abolition illustrates this nicely. The latter, in her activism as well as her philosophical writing, begins from an urgent practical problem: ‘how to prevent the further expansion of prison populations and how to bring as many imprisoned women and men as possible back into what prisoners call “the free world.”’¹⁰⁴ This nonideal concern with improving the plight of prisoners here and now may be expected to lead to arguments for short-term criminal justice reform, but not so. Davis’s social-theoretical analysis of the prison industrial complex and its imbrication with capitalism, racism, and sexism leads her to argue that the way forward is total abolition. To make prison abolition work, though, Davis acknowledges that we need to do much more than simply subtract prisons from the world as it is. Abolitionism ‘require[s] us to imagine a constellation of alternative strategies and institutions, with the ultimate aim of removing the prison from the social and ideological landscapes of our society’.¹⁰⁵ Thus, starting from the urgent problem of the plight of imprisoned people, Davis ends up arguing not just for the radical position of prison abolition, but for a thoroughgoing transformation of society as a whole.

Davis does imagine a radically different society, but the normative and practical authority of her arguments is not derived from an ideal model.¹⁰⁶ The normativity of her arguments comes from the pressing need to address deep injustice, and her utopian proposals serve to denaturalize the existing prison system and as proposals for practical solutions to the problems prisons are supposed to solve.

¹⁰² Barrett 2019, p. 103; see also Barrett 2023. Outside of the debate about ideal theory, there are other conceptions of problem solving which do not reduce it to short-term reformism, such as Jaeggi’s (2018) pragmatist-Hegelian conception of forms of life as problem-solving entities.

¹⁰³ Cf. Levy 2016, pp. 331–32.

¹⁰⁴ Davis 2003, p. 20.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹⁰⁶ Rachel Fraser (2023, p. 97) thus gets Davis wrong when claiming that she derives normative authority from the principle ‘Prisons should not exist’.

It is true that Davis's positive proposals for transformative justice do play a certain role in justifying her claim that we should abolish prisons. After all, we could agree that prisons are terrible but believe that there simply are no alternative options; in this way, providing an alternative solution strengthens the argument for abolition. But this is very different from the role that ideal models play in ideal-theoretic approaches. To see why, consider the methodological status of small-scale reformist policy solutions. Say that we find it problematic that prisoners are socially isolated, and therefore we propose a policy that bans restricting prisoners' use of phones and internet. That policy is clearly not an ideal model of what justice requires of us; it is simply a practical proposal that is meant to bring us closer to justice. But now suppose, with Angela Davis, that we think such reformist policy proposals are insufficient at best and outright counterproductive at worst. Instead of reform, we propose a fundamental transformation not just of the prison system but of society at large. Naturally, the more wide-ranging such transformative proposals are the more difficulties we will face in assessing their plausibility and desirability. But, leaving those issues aside, in terms of normative methodology, the role of utopian proposals for reorganizing society is not fundamentally different from the role of small-scale policy fixes. Shelby, on the other hand, invests his ideal model with independent authority: through reflection on moral principles, he concludes that prisons have a place in a just society and therefore need not be abolished. Clearly, other ideal theorists could come to a different conclusion; other 'problem solvers' may argue for small-scale reforms. But this example should have demonstrated that it is not true that, without ideal theory, we somehow limit the radicalism of our thinking; in some cases, just the opposite may be true.

Ideal theorists, of course, will say that in order to assess whether any proposal, small-scale or utopian, does in fact promote justice, we will need a background ideal theory of justice. I have not, here, been able to present a comprehensive refutation of that counterargument. What I have shown is that it relies on the very premise that materialists contest. Thus, without further argumentation, it is question-begging in assuming the normative and/or practical authority of ideal models that materialists dispute. In fact, insofar as Kantian constructivists, like Rawls and Korsgaard, already agree that normative theory is 'the use of reason to solve practical problems',¹⁰⁷ they really owe us an account of why ideal theory is a good solution to any of the pressing political problems we face.

On the materialist account, thinking about our political aims in terms of a set of ideal models which tell us what justice 'requires of us' is fetishistic. But there are other

¹⁰⁷ Korsgaard 2003, p. 115.

ways of thinking about our long-term aims. If we start from the need to overcome existing injustices, then the radicalism of our proposed solutions depends on how entrenched we think those injustices are. Our attempts to transform the world no doubt benefit from reflection on what a radically different social world would look like—and insofar as it is the best proposal we can think of, we may even term it ‘ideal’ in a loose sense—but such ideas would have the character of practical proposals for social change without carrying normative or practical authority of their own. We may well decide to write ‘recipes ... for the eateries of the future’.¹⁰⁸ If they look enticing enough, they may inspire us to try them out. But those recipes will not tell us what to eat; they are mere suggestions for how to satisfy our needs. And the ‘proof of the pudding’, Friedrich Engels once wrote, ‘is in the eating’.¹⁰⁹

VI. CONCLUSION

I have tried to show in this article that Mills’s suggestion to see debates about ideal theory as a dispute between materialism and idealism is a fruitful one. Where different authors appeared to be talking past one another, I have argued, we can better make sense of their disagreements once we see that they (often implicitly) rely on materialist and idealist assumptions, respectively.

Let me offer a schematic reconstruction of how the dispute looks once we take this into account. Rawls originally justified his ideal-theoretic method in an explicitly pragmatic way that was supposedly neutral between idealism and materialism. Mills then offered a critique from a materialist point of view, claiming that Rawls’s method is ideological because it cannot help us address entrenched injustices. The response from defenders of ideal theory was largely to abandon Rawls’s pragmatic justification for ideal theory, justifying it, instead, on epistemological grounds: to know what social changes will make our society more just, we need a theory of what a wholly just society would look like.¹¹⁰ But this argument relies on controversial idealist metanormative premises: namely that ideal models have normative authority of their own. In fact, it relies on just the kind of Kantian dualism—that moral philosophy happens in the strictly non-empirical realm of pure reason—that Rawls claimed to have purged from his own Kantianism.¹¹¹ But if defenders of ideal theory *cannot* rely on such metanormative

¹⁰⁸ Marx 1867, p. 706.

¹⁰⁹ Engels 1880, p. 19.

¹¹⁰ Robeyns 2008, pp. 343–346; Simmons 2010; Stemplowska 2008.

¹¹¹ Rawls 1980, p. 516.

assumptions, they will have a much harder time defending their methods against the materialist critique. They would have to make arguments for ideal theory compatible with materialism. This is hard, because a core claim of materialism is that ideals lack the kind of normative *or* practical authority that would justify the method. In any case, the upshot is that both proponents and critics of ideal theory would do well to be much clearer about their metanormative and social-theoretical commitments.

I have also argued that the objection materialists have against ideal theory is most precisely articulated as a fetishism critique. I am very sympathetic to Mills's ideology critique; it is certainly true that, by abstracting away from the nonideal, ideal-theoretic methods tend to draw our attention away from pressing injustices. Yet, this is not a *necessary* feature of the method. The example of Shelby's work discussed above shows that it is possible to do ideal-theoretic work informed by careful engagement with real-world racial oppression. If we want to object to ideal theory *as a method*, and not just as it is most often practiced, we need to explain why it is methodologically misguided. I have argued that it is so because it accords independent authority to ideal models which, in fact, do not carry such authority. On a materialist image of the world, our normative thinking is nothing but a continuation of our practical engagements with the world we inhabit; our concepts cannot be understood apart from the practical problems they were intended to help us solve. The idea that political theorists are here to 'discover what justice requires of us'¹¹² is an inversion; the question we should ask is what we require of our social world. This question arises for us, only because the world appears to us as problematic; it leaves us dissatisfied. This 'desiring negation that action brings to what is given'¹¹³ may well drive us to think in a highly utopian manner about the kind of society that would satisfy our desires. But these positive proposals should be understood as the outcomes of human creativity; not as ideal models standing apart from our agency and constraining it.

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¹¹² Freeman 2012, p. 186.

¹¹³ Young 1990, p. 6.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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