

Interrogations for Equality Seminar

Session 2. Racial Inequality

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David Calnitsky

Reading "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," I found the distinction Mills makes between ideal-as-idealized-model and ideal-as-descriptive-model to be very close to the distinction often found in Marxist political economy and philosophy between mental generalizations/idealizations and real abstractions, respectively--though this is a debate I've always had difficulty with. So, as I understand it, if both neoclassical economics and Marxian political economy are in the business of building general theories to discover the structures beneath the mess of concrete reality, they are said to have different relationships to the concrete. Neoclassical economics is then accused of creating sets of ideal laws that operate when many concrete factors are assumed *not to exist*. By contrast, the search for real abstractions in the Marxian tradition, like the ideal-as-descriptive-model, is a search for those essential features of actually existing concrete factors (so to understand the general laws which regulate the capitalist system). I think this is what Marx is talking about in the methodological discussion in the Grundrisse, which implores social scientists/philosophers to move from the concrete to the abstract so to better understand the concrete (which then in the context of broader abstractions appears to be less chaotic).

The problem for me with the ideal-as-descriptive-model (or real abstractions) is the seeming difficulty or impossibility in extracting what is "essential" from the concrete. Mills, on the ideal-as-descriptive-model says, "These are global, high level concepts, undeniable abstractions. But they map accurately (at least arguably) crucial realities ... so while they abstract, they do not idealize" (p.175). But how do we know our ideal-as-descriptive-model is in fact "accurate"? If there are an infinite amount of characteristics attributable to any concrete factor, by what principle can we decide something or other is essential or inessential (ie, inexcludable or excludable)? There seems to be no principle here telling us how to build our ideal-as-descriptive-models. In that way, it's hard for me to see why Mills' examples of "white supremacy" and "patriarchy" (p.175) aren't entirely arbitrary (something he wants to avoid).

On a different topic, in Mills' "Racial Liberalism," he says "the repudiation of racial liberalism will thus require more than a confrontation with the historical record. It will also require an acknowledgement...that this record shows that the workings of such a polity are not to be grasped with the orthodox categories of raceless liberal democracy. Rather the conceptual innovation called for is a recognition of white supremacy as itself a political system..." Here, and elsewhere in the piece, I guess I think about liberalism differently from Mills. For me, if one says they hold liberal norms in the ideal sense, it does not mean that they believe in the just-so story of the social contract, nor does it mean that they do not recognize the actually existing history of institutional racism in, say, the US. Instead it means that they are specifically concerned with that actually existing racism and insist that the US is in fact not the liberal society some claim it to be (ie, they do not claim it is to be "grasped with the orthodox categories of raceless liberal democracy"), and finally that they wish for those ideal liberal norms to be realized. In that way the contrast Mills sets (p.1386) between the ideal theory of a fictitious universal liberalism and a nonideal theory expressing the reality of social hierarchy is not only not a contrast, but a directly complementary pair of ideas.

Catherine Willis

Can an ideal theory of justice be written by those not in the social position of white males?

In this weeks readings, the failure of liberal theory to help achieve better equality is explained by two main reasons: 1) the nature of ideal theory itself and 2) the authors of the theory.

1) The first conclusion that is drawn is that ideal theory in and of itself is the wrong tool because it asks what “justice demands in a perfectly just society” which is not where the US and many other countries currently are (Mills 2008 in PMLA, 1384). Furthermore, as a tool it can actually be detrimental, as it can mask the preexisting inequalities by assuming them away. This thus seems to write off the role of an ideal theory of justice all together.

2) The perseverance and popularity of liberalism as well as Rawls and others inability to push forward to address issues such as racism that are central to achieving justice in the US context is much related to the social position of these authors and the blinders that brings with them. It is for this reason that Mills calls ideal theory an *ideology* (Mills 2005 in Hypathia, 172).

But if liberal theories are not necessarily wrong (Mills 2008 in PMLA, 1383), (although unhelpful as a tool) I ask first of all if and how they can they be useful. Furthermore, as the field and theorists of political philosophy become increasingly diversified, can liberal theory change or other ideal theories be written in a meaningful way (that makes it a more useful tool). This would require that ideal theory be written from a space which is not conceptually or demographically white; can an ideal theory of justice even be produced in this space?

J. Edward Connery

The significant difference and distance between ideal and non-ideal theory in philosophy appears as great as the difference between any two pairings of, for example, academic research and policy analysis. There have always been conflicts between those who pursue either an unachievable ideal or seemingly obscure and inconsequential “fact” and those who pursue concrete change (or protection of the status quo) in the actual lived experience of most human beings. The frustrations on either side are both real and valid as the constraints of one approach often represent a fundamental deficiency for the other. In his discussion of ideal verses non-ideal theory (specifically relating to justice vis-à-vis race) Charles Mills makes a compelling argument. By contrasting the ideal and just society found in the work of John Rawls with the historical, social, economic, and political realities of the United States (and/or the modern world at large) Mills’ argument makes clear that Rawls’ ideal is not only vastly different from the real structure of contemporary society but that some of the assumptions underlying Rawls’ argument are, at best, problematic – namely Eurocentrism and a privileged, White view of liberalism.

That being said, there are at least two aspects of Mills’ argumentation that seem either unnecessary or so narrowly interpreted as to be incomplete. First is the is matter of critiquing Rawls’ either lack of attention to or underdeveloped understanding of the issue of race. Mills’ thoroughly establishes that Rawls’ work pays little-to-no attention to race (as well as gender) as a significant social construct influencing one’s experience of justice or injustice. In-and-of itself

this argument seems to provide valuable support for the cause of non-ideal theory. But the ongoing and repeated criticism of Rawls' silence or misunderstanding (e.g., considering race as a "natural fact" rather than social construct) seems to do little in furthering Mills' already established position that ideal theory is too far from reality to be meaningfully applied. As a reader, one is compelled to ask why – if he has already clearly established the vast differences between ideal and non-ideal theory – does Mills pursue a line of criticism that amounts to challenging an argument from framework with the tools of an argument from an entirely different framework? Having argued that ideal and non-ideal theory are wholly divergent in many significant aspects, it seems unnecessary to critique an admittedly ideally theory for not meeting the standards of non-ideal theory.

There is also the matter of Mills' treatment of Rawls' claim that a society is a "cooperative venture for mutual advantage." Mills' rightfully argues, for example, that African captives never agreed to or reaped an advantage from American slavery. The same, of course, would apply to the experience of the Native Americans who were conquered and massacred by European settlers. If – and only if – Rawls' definition ended with "mutual advantage," Mills' opposition to Rawls' definition would seem unimpeachable. However, Mills' himself provides an extended citation ("Racial Liberalism") in which society is a "cooperative venture for mutual advantage... designed to advance the good of those taking part in it." In the context of American social, intellectual, political, and economic history this definition of society is not only a very workable definition but a fairly accurate description of the lived experience of Black, Native, Asian, female, Gay/Lesbian, and any other marginalized American subgroups. To understand this, the emphasis must be placed on the "good of those taking part." History bears out the fact that, largely because our society is thought of as cooperation for mutual advantage, efforts are consistently made to define and restrict membership – i.e., "those taking part" – in order to ensure that Liberal ideals are nominally upheld without actually extending advantage to all. The exclusion of women, the poor, slaves, former slaves (under Jim Crow laws), and others has been a deeply flawed attempt to realize Liberalism through an unjust modification of participation not, as Mills seems to argue, an underlying failure of Rawls' Liberal definition. Put simply, Mills' seems only to have established that attempts to restrict participation have successfully limited the expansion of mutual advantage not that Rawls' conception of society is demonstrably incorrect. The strength of Mills' position lies in the demonstration that ideal theory cannot address the real issues of a civilization that exists in "less happy circumstances," rather than challenging Rawls' definition of society simply because part of the definition – cooperation and mutual advantage – has not been fulfilled without any regard for the second part of the definition – participation. Neglecting participation makes this critique incomplete given that history has demonstrated that participation (e.g., voting rights, access to education, economic opportunity, fair housing, etc.) is one of the central issues of (in)equality in the American experience.

And yet, perhaps Mills' intent is different or beyond the understanding discussed above. If there is another purpose to Mills' argument, this reader looks forward the opportunity to explore the issues and consider the author's position further.

Kelly Robbins

In his review of *Who Cares about the White Working Class*, Michaels claims that a society where races are proportionally represented in each economic class “would not be more just, it would be proportionately unjust.” On first reading, this struck me as false. Yes, if the non-racist society’s economic classes are extremely stratified, then this society is not a *fully just* one. However, in comparison with a class-stratified, racist society, it is *more just*. A possible exception is a society in which racial over-representation among the poor was “solved” by replacing some of those people with others chosen by an equally unjust process (rather than finding some just or less unjust process for assigning class).

Is Michaels’ extreme claim merely meant to grab attention and point it in the direction of class discrimination...or is he meaning to make the claim that a concern for economic inequality is a kind of catch-all concern, because there are no just ways of assigning class and all unjust ways of doing so are equally unjust?

Mills claims that most black ideologies question the fundamental goodness of democracy because of the racial injustice purportedly inherent in it (Racial Liberalism, 122-123). This is a question we also see in current GLBT movements, demanding recognition for the idea that whether a person should get equal rights/full citizenship should not be up for popular vote. Even at the level of the courts – elected or appointed – the popular vote is present, though several steps removed. Both the GLBT community’s struggle, and the failure of black ideologies to be recognized in the “mainstream” that Mills discusses, provide some convincing evidence that even ideally democratic processes are will not result in an ideal distribution of rights. Mills solution is to use non-ideal theory to deal with the real-world problems of rule-by-majority. Yet it seems that here, at least, the problem is the discrepancy between two ideals. Couldn’t an ideal theorist be in a position to recognize this same difficulty?

Alex Hyun

In *Rawls on Race/Race in Rawls*, Charles Mills draws a distinction between the “ideal ideal” and the “rectificatory ideal.” The ideal ideal society is “an ideally just society in the sense of a society with no past history of injustice.” The rectificatory ideal society is “an ideally just society in the sense of a society whose past unjust history has been corrected for” (178). Mills says that the ideal society central to Rawls’ work is the ideal ideal, not the rectificatory ideal (179). But this, Mills suggests, is a serious problem: *pace* Rawls, the ideal ideal cannot guide policy in the actual world when it comes to redressing the wrongs of historical racial injustice and other problems of partial compliance.

I am curious whether or not Mills is correct in thinking that the ideal ideal society cannot guide rectificatory policies in the actual, non-ideal world. It seems to me that we might be able to conceive of the ideal ideal society in such a way that it *could* guide such policy-making. We would just conceive of the ideal ideal society as being regulated by principles such as (A):

(A): All racial minorities who are seriously wronged by society’s past racial injustices are given reparations in the form of X, Y, and Z.

If (A) regulates the ideal ideal society, then the ideal ideal society *is* helpful in evaluating policies meant to redress historical racial injustices in the actual world. For then we would know that, everything else being equal, a policy that precludes the provision of reparations to (for instance) African Americans in the form of X, Y, and Z should be rejected; for such a policy would clearly deviate from the relevant principle of the ideal ideal society.

But *does* (A) regulate the ideal ideal society? On page 179, Mills points out that there are no races in the ideal ideal society since race is a social construction. He seems to take the absence of races in the ideal ideal society to entail its inability to “serve to adjudicate the merits of competing policies aimed at correcting for a long history of white supremacy.” But can’t (A) be included in the principles that regulate the ideal ideal society even though there are no races in the ideal ideal society? True, there are no racial minorities in the ideal ideal society, and so (A) does not refer to anyone in that society. But a principle can regulate a society without referring to anybody in that society (for instance, even if there were no moped drivers in Wisconsin, Wisconsin could have a law requiring all moped drivers to park their mopeds in designated spots. In such a case, Wisconsin would be regulated by a law that does not refer to anyone). And it doesn’t seem like (A)’s regulating the ideal ideal society would detract from its idealness, so perhaps the ideal theorist is free to incorporate it into her conception of the ideal ideal society, thereby allowing the ideal ideal society to be policy-guiding.

This was the most plausible way I could think of to defend Rawls’ view that giving the ideal ideal a central place in theorizing can yield the foundations for addressing problems of partial compliance. One question it raises is this: would such a modified use of the ideal ideal still be in the realm of ideal theory? Or would it be non-ideal theory? This is not clear to me. On the one hand, Mills seems to associate the use of the ideal ideal with ideal theory (180). But on the other hand, in *Racial Liberalism*, Mills describes nonideal theory as the kind of theory concerned with corrective measures (1385). So what about when we conceive of the ideal ideal society as containing corrective measures?

Noel Howlett

I’m not sure if, in reading through Mills’ articles on Racial Liberalism and Ideal Theory, I understand the connection between the two as Mills writes them. As I understand Mills on racial liberalism he seems to be saying that people (theoretically) existed on an (morally) equal level before the metaphoric social contract was established. The contract that was established departs significantly from the ideal and is highly racialized, thus benefiting members of particular groups over others. As liberal political theory and practice have changed over time, the subset of people that have historically not been granted full and equal rights as full and equal people has come to represent a significant stumbling block for the theory. In order to achieve a polity that more closely approximates the ideal set by liberal egalitarian political theory we need to a) recognize the historic fact of oppression, and b) work to deracialize the social contract.

After reading Mills’ piece on ideal theory though I wonder how the stance he takes on rewriting the social contract relies on, uses, or ignores nonideal theory. It seems to me that Mills is using ideal theory rather than nonideal theory in thinking about racial liberalism. If this is indeed the case, I wonder which one of the senses of ideal (i.e. ideal-as-model) he describes in the ideal theory piece Mills is referencing. If Mills is using ideal theory, I wonder what sort of

justification can be given for using it over nonideal theory. Also, if Mills is using ideal theory, I am unsure which of the senses of ideal Mills is using to argue for the deracialized social contract.

Kevin Cunningham

During seminar, I would most like to discuss Charles Mills' discussion of the interplay between ideal and nonideal theory. Mills argues that ideal theory's abstraction from real social situations makes it an inappropriate starting point upon which to model political policies. In practice, we do not emerge from the state of nature nor from behind a veil of ignorance; rather, there are long-standing power structures that create asymmetrical opportunities for different groups of people. Hence, Mills urges that we begin by engaging with the actual political conditions of society through nonideal theory.

His argument for the shortcomings of ideal theory is well-taken. However, there is reason to be less optimistic about the successful divorce of nonideal from ideal theory. I see nonideal ideal as strongly informed by ideal theory. Like the schematic of an engine, ideal theory articulates the function of the state in very general terms. In doing so, it sharply demarcates the political domain, establishing which values and duties fall under the aegis of the state. Importantly the components of this general schematic, unlike those of engines, have interests and rights, and ideal theory establishes which means and actions are permissible in dealing with individuals (and groups). I may do anything to my spark plugs, but ideal theory seeks to establish how the state should treat its citizens.

So, say we have an ideal theory that proscribes a certain function of the state. When we go back to the real world, we find that political institutions are not realizing this function; now is the time for nonideal theory. However, may we abandon the constraints imposed by ideal theory to impose corrective measures in order to rectify the long-standing oppressive powers of racism and sexism? May we deviate from our schematic, using means that are unjust (as according to our ideal theory) to improve conditions that are unjust? If we can't, then we may just be left with bad conditions--racial inequality persists because the state (as per its ideal function) is powerless to enact the means to end it. If we can, the state seems to violate some individuals' rights and, in doing so, becomes something other than the ideally just state. I'm inclined to the former approach, but this dilemma is at the heart of some important policy debates (coerced wealth redistribution, group reparations, etc.)

Piko Edwoodzie

Mills makes a compelling critique of Rawls' theory of liberalism in "Ideal Theory' as Ideology." More specifically, he highlights Rawls' omission of the discussion of race (and gender) in his work. The crux of his argument is that this omission is due to Rawls' commitment to ideal theory. After explicating some of the concepts and assumptions of ideal theory, he asks, sarcastically but seriously, "how in God's name could anybody think that this is the appropriate

way to do ethics?" To this, he raises and dismisses several arguments (such as this one: "ethics is concerned with the ideal, so it doesn't have to worry about the actual.") before concluding that "ideal theory...is really ideology." What follows in his discussions are the virtues of "nonideal theory," his proposed alternative to ideal theory. After reading his work, I am still left with the question, "how in God's name could anybody think that this is the appropriate way to think about ethics?" Really, how could one propose a way to think about making the world a better place, to put it very crudely, while imagining a different world? To put it differently, what are the advantages of ideal theory, at all? Perhaps by asking these questions, I have given away the fact that I am a sociologist (in training), not a philosopher. So while this may be a question too basic to spend time on, I think it is important for two reasons. Before putting forth my reasons, I guess I need to admit that I bring this up again, after our Mills readings, because I did not find his answers to my questions to be adequate. I don't think it is enough to say that ideal theory has been the way for a great amount of philosophers, and has led them to ignore racial injustice, because a great amount of philosophers are white ("Racial Liberalism" pg 1384). I also think more should be added to the argument that ideal theory is really an ideology. (I can speak more to why I don't find these answers to be adequate during our class discussion) Back to my two reasons. First, I think a clearer understanding of why some philosophers rely on ideal theory is important in order to not "throw the baby out with the bath water," as the saying goes. Mills is a tad too quick to turn to nonideal theory for my liking. So the question I ask above is genuine, what are the advantages of ideal theory? Second, and more importantly, understanding the advantages of the use of ideal theory is important because it seems like even our alternative to ideal theory, nonideal theory, is still going to rely on some fashion of ideal theory. Thus it would be good for us, or maybe just for me, to know what ideal theory does in order to appropriately put it to use in nonideal theory.

A more general thought directed to my fellow sociologists (in training): would we not find a similar critique of some of our founding theorists, in terms of the explicit exclusion of some sections of the population of in their theorizing? As I read Mills' writings, I could not help but think how interesting it would be to understand whether the world they wrote about reflected the actual world.

Justin Lonsbury

The distinction Professor Mills makes between ideal and non-ideal theory is a useful one in that it helps to remind justice seekers that simply thinking about what it would be like in a just and well-ordered society is not enough to bring about such a reality. I agree that focusing only on mapping out the governance of a well-ordered society could conceal and sustain existing injustices and oppression. Furthermore, I support rectifactory measures Mills mentions such as affirmative action and reparations. However, I think that Mills undervalues ideal theory in general and Rawls in particular. I agree with Mills that one will be more successful changing the world by considering how existing systems of oppression and domination actually function. However, the direction and inspiration for such change can very well germinate in considerations of the ideal in the abstract. Adding race and gender to the host of considerations taking place behind the veil could very well lead to insights that not only expose existing injustices but point to areas of intervention. While claims of "reverse discrimination" and John Roberts style justice

certainly offer reason for concern regarding the application of incomplete and malformed notions of justice, perhaps the problem relates more to who has the actual decision-making power than the method of theorizing the action. After all, couldn't the difference principle be used to argue *against* claims of reverse discrimination and *for* rectifactory measures? I'm not sure I understand. Can't ideal and non-ideal theory/theorists both make legitimate contributions?

Sarah Bruch

3 Points

1: Groupism

Mills argues for a move from the individualist social ontology to a group ontology because it better maps the underlying metaphysics of the sociopolitical order (Racial Liberalism: 1388). But what are the implications of moving to a group-based ontology? But how do the groups get defined and who gets to define them? And what would Brubaker say? Brubaker argues against reducing study of race to study of groups or group conflict because we need to pay attention to how these groups are constituted/constructed/etc. and not take them as given, assume they are the important basis on which to generalize, reify them, and give them agency and interests. He labels "groupism" as the tendency to take discrete, bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis. For Brubaker this is a bad thing because it treats groups as if they were internally homogeneous, externally bounded groups, even unitary collective actors with common purposes. That ethnic/racial/national common sense is a key part of what we want to explain, not what we want to explain things with because by using the common sense meanings we are essentializing and naturalizing. As analysts we should try to account for the ways in which and the conditions in which this practice of reification, this powerful crystallization of group feelings can work. But we should not reinforce the reification of these groups in our social analysis. What would Mills response be to Brubaker's argument?

For Mills is race an unchanging principle? Don't definitions of groups and categories change over time? How is this explained within the paradigm articulated by Mills. I can see race as being an unchanging principle if it just means a general principle of division, but I would like to hear more about how it is operationalized and how changes occur over time and what causes these changes. For example, how and why did the Irish become white? The contract was restricted to whites, but how was whiteness defined at the time and how has this definition of whiteness changed over time? The only place I see in the readings about changes in the principle of race is where Mills describes how whites saw their advantage as differential but fair and now in a color-blind phase of the contract they do not see it as differential at all (Racial Liberalism: 1394).

Clearly the only meaningful racial boundary for Mills is the white – non-white boundary but how does this boundary come to be known? And what leads to the stability in the general principle of differentiating white versus non-white, or do we think that there has been changes not only in categorization (i.e. who is included in the privileged group) but also in the principle on which it is based? Is use of the U.S. and South Africa a further sign that Mills understands race to be only about white versus non-white or even more specifically white versus black? Even in these societies the principle of race does not mean the same thing, and certainly the way boundaries

were defined and made meaningful by the state was not the same. Is the Nazi Germany example of white on white racial violence not used because it does not fit with the white – non-white understanding of race? The argument that race was/is used in the U.S. and South Africa to create “racial states” as Goldberg argues leaves us with an understanding of the U.S. and South Africa as exceptions that are particular because of their racialized nature. Why not situate the link between race and citizenship within the broader literature on how states and citizenship are defined - the inclusionary and simultaneously exclusionary boundary drawing processes?

2: Why racial contract?

Why racial contract? Is it to elucidate the racialized nature of the contract just as Pateman did the gendered nature of the contract? Or is it that the contract is a contract of domination as Mills cited as being articulated by Rousseau, with race being one of the specific forms of domination along with gender, class, etc. Or is the racial domination of a different form or type or intensity or primacy than the gender or class domination e.g. is there something specifically important or extraordinary about the racial aspect? What is specifically racial about it? Much if not all of what Mills describes appears to be applicable to a more general or broad understanding about the principles of division.

Mills critique of liberalism seems to be along the same lines as the critique of Myrdal and de Tocqueville and liberalism or liberal institutions in general. Myrdal and de Tocqueville are both criticized as seeing the racism of the US as a regrettable exception to the otherwise liberal tradition, an exception that is rooted in irrational prejudice among individuals rather than embedded in political institutions, ideologies, or more complex social relations that sustain hierarchies and inequalities. Both de Tocqueville and Myrdal saw race and racism as exceptions to more fundamental features of American politics. So although de Tocqueville saw race as a problem for the US, it was not the primary story about the US which was distinguished by its egalitarianism and liberalism. Myrdal also followed de Tocqueville in arguing that racism was an exceptional situation to the otherwise liberal and egalitarian American creed. Irrational prejudice, Myrdal argued, led White Americans to abandon their more typical commitments to tolerance and individual equality. For Mills, is the problem of the racial liberalism inherent in the social contract racial because it was created by people with irrational prejudice or because it was created by individuals who are blind because of their social location?

3: Positionality – reflexivity

Mills critiques ideal theory as hegemonic ideology in that it serves the interests of the dominant group to which the majority of philosophers belong and reflects their particular experience of reality. Is this similar or different from Bourdieu’s critique of sociology and his call for reflexivity? What are the implications and solution for Mills? Do blacks or others from various social groupings have a distinctive perspective similar to standpoint theory mentioned in one of the pieces i.e. the idea that your social location affects you cognitively? This is also compatible with what Bourdieu says about the relationship between the homology between the objective and subjective. Or is Mills articulating something different? Mills discusses the lack of descriptive representation in philosophy as one of the reasons race is not on the table in general. Leaving aside the potentially problematic assumption that descriptive representation leads to substantive representation (i.e. that blacks represent a black point of view), is the whiteness of philosophers really the same issue as the lack of race as a subject in philosophy?

Gina Schouten

As I was reading the criticisms of ideal theory offered by Mills, I found myself wanting to defend ideal theorizing on two counts: First, it seems to me that ideal theorizing *can* be useful to those of us who are concerned with race and gender injustice. Second, I think that ideal theory can be done in such a way as to enable us to recognize the need for such interventions as affirmative action—that is, I think that ideal theory need not entail “colorblind” policies that ignore, and therefore perpetuate, oppressive social structures.

I am only defending the *possibility* of doing ideal theory such that it is useful and sensitive to structures of oppression. Furthermore, I have some reservations about my understanding of what constitutes ideal theory. What I want to defend is the possibility of using a normative, ideal-as-idealized picture of how a just society looks *in conjunction with nonideal theory* to make progress in theorizing about social justice. Of course, doing this well may require significant conceptual and demographic changes in how this theorizing is done.

First, I think ideal theory can be useful to those who are concerned with race and gender injustice, because we are so entrenched in oppressive social structures that there is important work to be done in determining what society would look like if that were not the case. Mills asks the following question: “Can it possibly serve the interests of *women* to ignore female subordination, represent the family as ideal, and pretend that women have been treated as equal persons?” (Ideology, 172). I agree that it cannot. But I think that it may serve the interests of women (at least I want to say that it would help direct my own personal agenda as a woman) to determine whether, for example, occupational choice in the ideally just society remains correlated with sex even though circumstances are arranged so that caretaking professions are fairly valued, or whether, in contrast, occupational choice is no longer predictable by sex at all. In short, there may be some important questions for which we need ideal theory. Moreover, if we do ideal theory in conjunction with nonideal theory, and if we carefully bear in mind that our abstractions are idealizing to determine what *ought to be*, and not what *is*, we can investigate those important questions without ignoring subordination, etc.

Second, Mills says that “[b]y the apparently innocuous methodological decision to focus on ideal theory, white political philosophers are immediately exempted from dealing with the legacy of white supremacy in our actual society. You do not need affirmative action—and you certainly do not need reparations—in a society where no race has been discriminated against in the first place...By a weird philosophical route, the “color blindness” already endorsed by the white majority gains a perverse philosophical sanction” (Liberalist, 1385). But why would the ideal theorist who believes that the ideally just society is raceless come to the conclusion that the best way to reach that ideally just society from our current nonideal society is to ignore race altogether? If the ideally just society is raceless, then surely the best route to get to that society from where we are now involves considerable attention to race, oppressive social structures, and the history of race relationships in our country. So far, I don’t understand why ideal theory done carefully and responsibly must ignore and thus perpetuate racial oppression.

Jeffrey Grigg

This weekend I read an article in the New York Times Magazine by Paul Krugman inspired by the economic reckoning of 2008 called “How Did Economists Get It So Wrong?” (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/06/magazine/06Economic-t.html?em>). In the first section of the article, “Mistaking Beauty for Truth,” Krugman discusses how the field became enthralled—even seduced—by mathematical models of rational actors operating in perfect markets. Krugman calls this a “romanticized and sanitized vision of the economy” that ignored the “flaws and frictions” that exist in reality (and can lead to financial pandemonium). Going forward, he presents a vision that accounts for reality by adopting principles of behavioral economics, which includes irrational actions, imperfect markets, and the like in favor of those of neoclassical economics.

How might this relate to the readings for this week? The conflict between neoclassical economics and behavioral economics seems similar to that between ideal and nonideal theory. Neoclassical economics and ideal theory present appealing models that exert a seductive power; behavioral finance and nonideal theory are messier but closer to the experienced truth. Mills differs from Krugman in one important respect: both think the “beautiful” model is incorrect, but Mills also asserts that it is unjust.

The error of ideal theory, to Mills, is laden with moral consequences because it conceals the historical and social facts of oppression and domination. Although some might forgive the ideal theorists for being incorrect, in “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology” Mills does not let that slide; he calls the error “evasive” and “not innocent.” There are evidently some excusable uses for ideal theory (I’d like to talk about these more on Thursday—along with how ideal theorists might or do defend themselves—but I think it has to do with the ideal-as-descriptive-model on page 166 of “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology”), but the error of ideal theory in this case is not value neutral.

The reason this error is of moral consequence is spelled out in “Racial Liberalism”: there is a “legacy” of racial oppression that needs to be “rectif[ied]” by “corrective measures.” In the face of this legacy, neutrality is complicit in—and may even reproduce—oppression. Rather, the appropriate response is active compensation to correct past ills, rather than treating people the same. This challenges a child’s sense of what is “fair,” which is to allocate equal shares of any given good. If one considers the ongoing consequences of past oppression, however, then fair treatment would allocate a greater share to those burdened with the legacy of oppression rather than equal shares to all. I imagine we will return to this definition frequently during this semester.

Justin Horn

Mills raises two closely-related criticisms of mainstream contemporary Anglo-American political philosophy. The first criticism aims to point out a serious omission in the philosophical literature: Mills contends that in the wake of Rawls, political philosophers have paid inadequate attention to the question of what should be done to redress the (contingent, but very deep) injustices present in our society. In particular, Mills argues that philosophers haven’t spent sufficient time and energy exploring the relationship between normative principles of justice and socio-political issues involving race and gender. The second criticism deals with philosophical

methodology: Mills claims that the pursuit of “ideal theory” in political philosophy is deeply flawed, and that the popularity of this methodology is largely responsible for the misplaced distribution of philosophical labor referenced in the first criticism. While I'm fairly sympathetic to the first criticism, I'm not sure I'm sold on the second.

Ideal theory seeks to set out the principles of justice which would govern a perfectly just society, while non-ideal theory is concerned with “corrective measures, with remedial or rectificatory injustice” (“Racial Liberalism,” 1385). Mills clearly believes that nonideal theory is to be preferred to ideal theory, but it's not clear to me why we should think this, as opposed to seeing the two as complimentary. Furthermore, I wonder whether it is even possible to do nonideal theory without leaning on assumptions borrowed from ideal theory.

I take it that a fundamental question at issue here is: how do we recognize injustices? Rawls's answer, and the answer of ideal theory generally, seems to be that we should do so by constructing a model of perfect justice, and then go on to identify injustices by looking for ways in which our society deviates from this model. The idea is not that we actually need a completed model before we can judge a particular institution to be unjust (I take it that we knew slavery was unjust before Rawls introduced us to the idea of the “veil of ignorance”!) but rather, the model allows us to explain precisely *why* certain social institutions are unjust. In the absence of such a model, I don't see how we can demarcate just from unjust social institutions in any principled way.

The question of *how* our society is unjust seems to me independent of, and prior to, the question of how to best rectify existing injustices. It seems to me that ideal theory is required to answer the first question, while nonideal theory is concerned with the second. It is one thing to say that ideal theory has been over-emphasized (relative to non-ideal theory) in the philosophical literature, and that this has impeded our progress in achieving racial justice. It is another to say that ideal theory is fundamentally flawed.

Tatiana Alfonso

The nonideal theories deal with the normative issues of social justice trying to get into account the history of injustices and subordination relationships. In consequence, nonideal theories are concerned with corrective measures for a society with a long history on injustices and exclusion. The concept “contract of domination” is situated in a nonideal framework, and points the structure of injustice that need to be eliminated. To do that, the theory has to eliminate the universal abstractions of personhood and must try to point the particular experience of a group of people. In that sense, it seems to be a tension between the equality ideal of the liberal tradition and the multiple identities in a real society with different kind of power relationships.

How does the nonideal theory resolve this tension to formulate the corrective measures in a society, being inside the liberalism? A corrective measure in the case of racial justice would imply a raceless society, just like in the mainstream liberal tradition? In the case of ethnic differences, which maybe you need to encourage the difference between groups, what kind of

corrective measures could be proposed from the nonideal theory of the contract of domination? Would those measures be considered liberal ideas?

Paul Hanselman

I found great sympathy for Mills' argument that ideal theory has behaved as an "ideology," in the sense that it has served to obscure fundamental dimensions of societal injustice (such as race and gender) and aided a glaring evasion of privileged white men to engage seriously with the moral standing of such taken for granted privileges. I'm still confused, however, about the diagnosis of the flaws in ideal theory and the appropriate solution going forward. (Both confusions might be resolved by clarifying Mills' distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory, but I don't even feel capable of expressing coherent confusion about this).

First, is the ideal theory as ideology that Mills attacks a method of moral inquiry or a specific point of view [characterized by very little experiential engagement with oppression for instance]? Or in the likely case that the answer is some messy, historically occurring combination of the two, can we separate them analytically with an eye toward doing better political theory in the future? My personal confusion arises because I understand Rawls as a stand-in for ideal theory projects in general, and Mills provides such a withering critique of Rawl's body of work, exacting great leverage from the fact that Rawls focuses so little attention on race (barely 6 pages of 2000, etc.). But Mills is also clearly invested in [at least the possibility of] reclaiming Rawls' veil of ignorance as a methodology in the service of worthwhile non-ideal theory-- this is the core argument in the reply to Schwartzman and defense of Okin, although he distinguishes a "later position" from the "initial position." Am I therefore right in understanding the problem with the traditional project of ideal moral theory as a persistent set of blind spots related to oppression rather than any mechanical problem with thinking about what justice requires in an ideal world?

The main reason I ask is because I would like to know how we ought to do better political theory going forward. Success in Mills' view has been largely gained by incorporating marginalized points of view (women, philosophers of color, etc.) into political theory. This again points to the fact that problems of vantage point are what need to be fixed (privileged white men necessarily don't experience or understand the deep significance of gender and racial oppression, for instance, and therefore their "ideal" theory is blind to their power as obstacles to justice). What, then, are the implications of the critique of ideal theory? Clearly, there we have a common stake in increasing the share of participants from marginalized points of view. But are there limits to this solution? That is evaded oppression for which a marginalized group can not be expected to brought to the enterprise (children? Animals?), Also, are there any ways to interrogate such blinds spots available to privileged white men? And shouldn't the tradition of ideal theory hold some promise for that, past failures notwithstanding?

Eunhe Han

Miills argued that the best way of realizing the ideal is through the recognition of the importance of theorizing the non-ideal. However, I think that it is important to recognize the ideal in order to recognize rights of the non-ideal. For example, without recognizing/theorizing social rights or human rights as an universal/natural law, we cannot claim the right of women, children, and minorities, for example not to be sexually harassed or discriminated in the labor market. Even when we develop the social welfare policies, we also need to recognize the right of the ideal (universal human being); otherwise, the policy would be targeting a population, which result in stigma.
