# Defending Ideal Theory Even If It's the Pits

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## 1. Introduction

David Schmidtz has long been one of the best writers in political philosophy, remarkably managing to defend his ideas with analytic precision without sacrificing readability. In *Living Together*,[1] he continues that while providing us with a masterful work that harks back to classical liberals such as John Locke, David Hume, Adam Smith, and John Stuart Mill. In doing so, he offers a model of what scholars of PPE (Philosophy, Politics, and Economics) should strive for: clarity of writing and philosophical acuity matched with clear appreciation of the best social science available to describe and analyze what we want from a social, political, and economic order (hereafter "the social order").

My views about what we want from the social order match Schmidtz's. That is partly because I have learned a great deal from him over the years, but our views were always well-aligned. That said, we do not agree about everything (no one does). We have one area of disagreement that I concentrate on here. It may be, though, that I am coming around to his way of thinking about this issue, so what I say here is somewhat tentative. My thesis is simple: Schmidtz is too quick to jettison ideal theory. Despite the plausible concerns he raises, I suspect that ideal theory can help provide guidance in the real world. Whereas Schmidtz insists that we get realistic ideals from a "sober assessment of problems here and now" (p. 79), I believe that considering ideal theories can also provide us with a path to a realistic ideal.

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[1] David Schmidtz, *Living Together: Inventing Moral Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023). All subsequent references to *Living Together* will be cited by page number parenthetically in the text.

**2. Ideal Theory**

I take ideal theory to be what Laura Valentini calls "full-compliance theory."[2] That is, in ideal theory, it is assumed that all citizens of a political system fully comply with the principles of justice theorized about. Ideal wealth egalitarian theories, for example, assume that all members of the theorized system are committed to wealth egalitarianism and do what is necessary, according to the theory, to maintain that egalitarian distribution. I believe that Schmidtz rejects the usefulness of ideal theory thus understood. He would say, I think, that if our theory refuses to admit people as they are, it is not helpful. I partly agree; I think, though, that we need to consider what sort of social system real people would comply with.[3]

I think that engaging in ideal—full-compliance—theory can help us to better understand what we should do in the real world. Having an ideal theory in mind can help us determine what we should work for in the real world, perhaps by helping us to recognize what real people would be willing to comply with.

It is reasonable to worry that in constructing an ideal theory, one merely assumes that everyone in the theorized society will comply, so that we learn nothing about what to encourage people to comply with or what to do when they do not. For this reason, some have proposed a more moderate form of idealization.[4] What I argue for below is a variation of that reaction. I claim that our theorizing must take into consideration the way prospective citizens of a political system can be reasonably assumed to behave, given the laws that would be enacted under specified principles of justice.

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[2] See Laura Valentini, "Ideal vs. Non-ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map," *Philosophy Compass* 7, no. 9 (2012): pp. 654–64. As Valentini explains, the understanding of ideal theory I adopt here differs from ideal theory understood as utopian theory or as end-state theory. These three understandings of ideal theory overlap. An ideal theorist might defend a desired end-state that is utopian by assuming that all members of the theorized society comply with its principles of justice. It may be that what I say here is best read as suggesting that ideal theory needs to be understood as being on a spectrum and that even if we are not discussing a permanent end-state, a complete utopia, or a fully compliant population, our theories can be more or less ideal.

[3] Schmidtz may agree, as he says: "That is not to say that ideal theory is hopeless. Realistic idealism identifies *x* as worthy of aspiration, starting from a sober assessment of problems here and now" (p. 79).

[4] See, e.g., Kevin Vallier, "In Defense of Idealization in Public Reason," *Erkenntnis* 85 (2020): pp. 1109–28.

In seeking to determine principles of justice, we must assume that citizens of our theory act rationally in accord with their own interests. If we propose principles of justice and then realize that real people would rationally not comply, we ought to reject those principles. There may, of course, be other requirements for the principles of justice defended by any particular theorist. A wealth egalitarian ideal theorist, on this view of ideal theory, could defend her view that wealth should be distributed equally, but must assume that the citizens of her theorized society will fully comply with its laws only if it is rationally in accord with their interests to do so. If her theory requires laws that citizens would not rationally comply with, she ought to seek to revise her theory.

With that primer on ideal theory in place, let's turn to Schmidtz.

### 3. Our Disagreement: How Knowing an "Ideal" Can Help

My disagreement with Schmidtz comes down to this: He rejects ideal theory; it is not clear to me that we should. To be candid, I do not think this matters for the broader picture that Schmidtz paints. Hence, my goal here is merely to suggest that we keep full-compliance theory and recognize that doing so has little impact on the practical matters Schmidtz and I are interested in. Refusing to jettison ideal theory need not change how we think the social order ought to be; it may give us additional support for our thinking about that practical issue. In my view and his, the primary goal of work in PPE is to consider how we can all live together in peace, to have a flourishing society, a society wherein we all do well together.

Consider Schmidtz's discussion of Carens Markets, in which "everyone is taxed in such a way that everyone ends up with equal after-tax income; yet, despite this, everyone keeps working hard to maximize gross income" (p. 73). This is highly unlikely. Schmidtz cites David Estlund[5] as indicating that the "predictable failure does not refute" (p. 74) the claim that it would be ideal. The problem with a Carens Market, on that view, is *only* its lack of *feasibility*. By contrast, I am inclined to believe that the infeasibility of a Carens Market is precisely because too many moves within such a market are *undesirable*, as Schmidtz points out.

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[5] Citing p. 217 of David Estlund, "Human Nature and the Limits (If Any) of Political Philosophy," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 39, no. 3 (2011): pp. 207–37.

While it might seem that a Carens Market is desirable—and thus is worth defending and striving for—this is dubious once it is recognized that it necessarily includes undesirable moves within it. The problem is that most real people—not those we simply assume will comply—will not consider it a good thing that our hard work leaves us no better off than our laziest neighbor. Most will not consider it a good thing that our hard work is used to support those we do not like, trust, or want to know. Most will not like being taxed more because others refuse to work or refuse to work in ways that others find helpful. All of these elements are parts of Carens Markets—at least Carens Markets where the participants are human beings—and all are undesirable.[6]

While Carens Markets have a desirable element that no one suffer or, perhaps more in line with Carens's view, that all do equally well, one desirable element does not make an ideal. An ideal home, for example, must include comfortable sleeping areas, but the presence of comfortable sleeping areas is not sufficient to call a home ideal. As Estlund agrees, a Carens Market is not feasible. It is not feasible, though, at least in part because it is not overall desirable. The latter fault means it will not attain full compliance from rational citizens. It thus cannot serve as an ideal theory where that entails full compliance but is realistic.[7]

A Carens Market is a lot like "the beautiful spot" that we might consider living in but that we cannot get to (it is not feasible) and has fire ants that cannot be eliminated (it is not desirable) (pp. 72–73). There is no way we can attain full compliance with the laws necessary for a Carens Market. People will find ways around giving up some of what they are supposed to have taxed away; that is *because* they do not desire what the Carens Market offers.

I agree with Schmidtz regarding the practical value of Carens Markets, but that is because I think he rightly shows that a Carens

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[6] I do not intend to defend a view about the objectivity of desirability. It is enough to note that most rational individuals will not find these moves that are required in Carens Markets desirable. This, of course, is why we cannot expect most people to comply with the laws within a Carens Market or the principles of justice it assumes. (The move is not from values to facts but from the facts of what people do [dis]value to the fact of what is [in]feasible.)

[7] Perhaps rational individuals can find a Carens* Market desirable. In a Carens* Market, everyone but me complies; everyone but me has the requisite psychology such that they are always happy to comply. A Carens* Market is obviously not an ideal theoretic system where that entails full compliance. Perhaps it is utopian in some odd (and selfish) way.

Market is not an ideal, not because ideals or ideal theory cannot be useful. Indeed, considering whether a Carens Market is ideal is instructive; it helps us recognize and face up to the limits of what we can expect real people to comply with.

It will likely be objected that I am missing the point and that a Carens Market would be a market society wherein all members fully, willingly, and happily comply with the system of taxation necessary to get the desired egalitarian outcome.[8] It might be added that my rejection of Carens Markets follows only from my inability to accept the hypothetical requirement that all in the system comply with its requirements. That is correct; it follows from my claim that we must assume that citizens of our theory act rationally in accord with their own interests. What is required for a Carens Market is that individuals therein not consider the desirability of the rules or not consider their own interests. Neither is plausible.

My larger point here is not that a Carens Markets is not a genuine ideal, though I am happy if that is accepted. The important point here is that discussing ideal (full-compliance) theory is useful. Discussing even flawed ideal theories can help us to recognize what real people would be willing to comply with, which can help us come up with a better ideal—or at least help us to improve our theorizing about real-world social systems.

## 4. Should We Jettison Ideal Theory? What Is the Real Question?

It is worth repeating that considering whether Carens Markets are ideal is itself useful, for doing so allows us to see what we might miss in encouraging such a system. We are forced to think: "If this is an ideal where all want to contribute so that all have equal resources, is it feasible? Can we actually attain this ideal?" From there, we go on to consider: "If it is attainable, how? If not, why not?" The lesson to take from considering Carens Markets is that we cannot expect human

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[8] This has always been the socialist's dream. For Karl Marx, the dictatorship of the proletariat exists primarily to change the way people think, so that they will be incentivized to work for the good of everyone. See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, Part II (1848; repr., 1888), https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/61/pg61-images.html. More recently, G. A. Cohen's ideal has all members of the fully egalitarian society he envisions having egalitarian desires and motivations. See G. A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), esp. pp. 360–72. I admit to being unable to imagine a society of actual human beings with psychologies that work as any of these views require.

beings to change so radically that they would willingly accept the sort of taxation necessary to sustain it.[9] With that lesson learned, we continue looking for *a more realistic theory*. Considering other proffered ideal theories can similarly offer important lessons.[10]

What we need is not just an ideal, but a *realistic ideal*, and considering ideal theories on offer can help us figure out what a realistic ideal is. A realistic ideal would be one that any rational person could envision living in, one in which they would rationally comply. This would be an ideal that was desirable and, perhaps, feasible. (If it were not feasible, it would be for reasons other than the lack of desirability.)

The question of interest is: If there is an ideal—one that is genuinely desirable (as opposed to a Carens Market or "the beautiful spot" with fire ants)—can it be helpful in determining how the social order ought to be? That, of course, is the point to ideal theory. If we can determine what an ideal social order would be like, we can move to nonideal theory to try to determine how we might move from our nonideal circumstances toward the ideal. That entails moving from a system in which some or many do not comply with the rules to a system wherein we can expect all to do so. (Perhaps this is accomplished in stages, with later stages having fewer likely noncompliers.)

On Schmidtz's view, we can do nonideal theory without worrying about this; we can jettison concern with ideal theory, determining our objectives in other ways (p. 77). But how? How do we get the objectives? It is not clear that "[a]ssuming perfect compliance leads down one road, realistic assumptions down another" (p. 77). Perhaps it is true in the case of a Carens Market, but that it is true in the case of one (flawed) system of full compliance does not mean it is true with all. That is, it may be that there is a system that can attain (close to) full compliance and is based on realistic assumptions. It

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[9] Similarly, they cannot be changed into Marx's ideal other-regarding citizens or Cohen's ideal citizens who always act so as to maintain equality.

[10] We ought to accept Schmidtz's claims that "theories are not arguments but maps" (p. 31), "[n]o map represents the only reasonable way of seeing the terrain" (p. 31), and "[k]nowing where maps clash" is helpful (p. 32). Different values can generate different maps (or theories). We can disagree about what is of value on the terrain and so disagree about the best map. Perhaps there is no single best map, as Schmidtz suggests. Perhaps, though, the best map is one that (somehow) points out what other maps include. (See my discussion of a plain or field in Section 7 below.)

would be worth pursuing such a possibility with realistic assumptions about the sorts of rules real human persons would comply with.

It may be that the real problem Schmidtz has with ideal theory is less about full compliance and more about the thought that such must be permanent, universal, or somehow sacred. He insists—rightly, I think—that "we need to distinguish between what is ideal and what *would be* ideal under different conditions," claiming that "Rawls's method of reflective equilibrium . . . *cannot* be reconciled with . . . treating ideal theory as a task to finish first, treat as settled, then apply to nonideal cases" (p. 80). Treating ideal theory as *settled* and then applying it may be the real problem.

As Schmidtz suggests, the process of reflective equilibrium is best thought of as always providing a tentative conclusion. Seeking tentative conclusions is, though, consistent with use by those seeking to improve our social order. That is, the process of reflective equilibrium yields a result—a tentative ideal—that can be applied, though its tentative nature is recognized. If the result of our adoption of that ideal is problematic—that is, if, in nonideal theory or in the real world, it leads us to make things worse—we realize that the supposed ideal was either not ideal or ceased being ideal. Perhaps that might be because the way people have developed, they no longer rationally comply with what they rationally complied with until then.[11] We would then use that information in a continuation of the process of reflective equilibrium. We can, I suggest, reject "fact-insensitive utopian idealism" without rejecting full-compliance theory.

Some will object that if we do not think of the outcome of reflective equilibrium in ideal theory as the *settled, permanent, universal* ideal, we have misunderstood the project. Others will object that accepting the outcome as tentative requires relying on mere intuition about the result, claiming that we reject the *supposed ideal* as ideal because we *somehow* realize the outcome is problematic. I will not say anything about that first claim other than to note that we ought to have a less lofty understanding of ideals and ideal theory, perhaps (consistent with what I say below) also recognizing the need for a "thinner" ideal.[12]

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[11] Alternatively, it may be that the application was problematic specifically because the conditions are not what they seemed or because the social conditions that were considered while engaging in the process of reflective equilibrium have changed.

[12] See Andrew Jason Cohen, "Contemporary Liberalism and Toleration," in *Cambridge Companion to Liberalism*, ed. Steven Wall

What of the second claim, that nothing about the process of reflective equilibrium can tell us the outcome is problematic? The claim is, I think, accurate. Taking the outcome to be problematic, after all, is part of the *input* of the (continued) process. It is why we continue the process, perhaps seeking to adjust the principles of justice it provides as *output*. This, after all, is how we would avoid merely "defining the original position so that we get the desired solution" (p. 77).[13]

## 5. Are Pits Clearer than Peaks?

Consider our topic from another perspective: Ideal—full-compliance—theory can result in a supposed ideal that is neither feasible nor desirable, leaving us no resources from ideal theory to rule out such results. Schmidtz's response is to reject the search for the ideal. He says that we do "not need to theorize about" the ideal of justice—the "peak"—because "peaks don't exist. Justice has no peak form. There is no climbing to be done, no destination to seek, no problem to solve, unless people are in" one of the many possible "pits." He continues: "All we need to know about is the pits: what counts as being in, what counts as climbing out. It is only when our situation has features that make for injustice that we need to be somewhere other than where we are. Justice is not a property so much as an absence of properties that make for injustice" (p. 81).

I think there is an obvious worry to Schmidtz's thought that "all we need to know about it is the pits": How do we know what counts as being in a pit or climbing out of a pit? How, that is, do we know what a pit is? What injustice is? To answer these questions, I think, would be to have a *theory of injustice*.[14]

Schmidtz thinks that it is easier to talk about the pits than about the pinnacles, but it is not clear why. He tells us: "The peak metaphor is a theoretical construct corresponding to nothing ever observed before. . . . Pits, by comparison, are documented tragedies,

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(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 189–211, for a parallel view about a thin comprehensive doctrine of liberalism.

[13] Schmidtz is here quoting John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 122.

[14] I do not think it makes sense to talk of an ideal (full-compliance) theory of injustice. There are, presumably, many ways people can fail to comply (or be unjust). Schmidtz's talk of a traffic management system (e.g., pp. 78–79) may do the needed work here.

not theoretical postulates" (p. 82). This sounds compelling, but I am not sure it is right.

If we cannot know that we have reached a pinnacle, how do we know we are in a pit? It seems likely that some may be unhappy where they are; they might *feel like* they are in a pit even if they are not. (I certainly think I have met people who claim their lives are going terribly even though they seem to be going well.) To know we are in a pit requires something more. It requires a theory. I think this is true whether we are talking about a pit as being merely bad or unjust.

Schmidtz might respond to this claim by insisting we do not need a theory to mediate our knowledge that we are in a pit. I am not sure I agree, but I do not think it matters because I do not think it is the first-person perspective that we need to be concerned with. I might agree that when I am in situation S, I want out of it. That is, I might agree that I simply grasp, sense, or intuit that S seems like a pit *to me*. The problem, however, is how *we who are thinking about what justice or injustice requires* can know whether someone else is in a pit, not whether *they* can know it.[15] It is not clear to me that we can even know whether they are in a bad situation, let alone if the badness of their situation is due to injustice.

Imagine a country, Plenty, wherein there is ample food, water, and other resources for all. Imagine there is a region of Plenty, Dearth, wherein the people do not have access to food or water sufficient to lead a good life. Perhaps they could go elsewhere in Plenty, but they choose not to. Assume that all of this is easily documented. Is it a tragedy? Is it unjust? Absent further information, it might seem so. Additional information, though, matters here just as it matters for determining whether a supposed ideal is really an ideal.

Assume that the people of Dearth are starving and seemingly miserable due to the lack of food and water. That certainly seems tragic. Given that Dearth is in Plenty, it might even seem prima facie unjust. Again, though, the facts of the case matter. If Dearth has scarce resources due to intentionally chosen actions by the people of Dearth designed to keep their resources at low levels—perhaps *because* they accept a religion for which a deeply ascetic life is the way to heaven—that matters. In such a situation, they may have enough such that they

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[15] I see no reason to think someone cannot be mistaken about their own being in a pit. As already suggested, I think people can be mistaken about whether they are in a bad situation. I certainly think they can be mistaken about whether that bad situation is bad due to injustice.

are happy despite, say, living on the edge of starvation. That situation no longer seems tragic or unjust. It seems not to be a pit. Or so I think.

What would be a Dearthian pit? Perhaps it would occur if the rest of Plenty acted in ways to limit severely the resources available in Dearth. Again, prima facie, that seems unjust. But again, I think we need more information. If the other Plentians limited those resources because Dearthians historically used any resources to attack the rest of Plenty, perhaps the limit is just. I do not know. The point is not that there cannot be a genuine pit, a situation wherein people are suffering unjustly. The point is that we need some way to determine whether the situation is genuinely unjust. We need more information than is apparent when we notice what seems like unjust suffering and we need some sort of theory.

Schmidtz and I agree—and I assume most would agree—that a productive world of plenty is (usually?) better than an unproductive world of dearth. But conditions matter in such situations as much as they do where Carens Markets might be attempted. Without knowing those conditions and having some theory by which to consider them, it is unclear how we can know what, if anything, justice requires in such cases. There is a myriad of possibilities. How do we tell these apart? How do we know which are genuine pits and which are not? I would suggest, as I did above, that what is required is a theory of injustice.

## 6. An Objection

Some might object that we do not need a theory of injustice at all, that we can instead simply ask people if they want help when they are in a pit. Perhaps. How would we know, though, to ask? And, even if we (plausibly) assume they know their own unhappy state, why would we assume they know it to be unjust?

We might ask anyone who is in a situation *we* would not choose for ourselves if they are in a bad state. There might, though, be people in situations that seem perfectly fine to us—perhaps that we would even choose for ourselves—that they would consider pits. A solitary ascetic might not think to ask someone who is poor whether they need help because he would plausibly think them making do with little is as intentional as his. Only asking those in situations *we* would not choose might leave us oblivious to people in situations that seem fine to us. That "it seems *so* fine that I did not think to ask" is of no help. We need more than that, if we are to take those people seriously as moral agents. We need, that is, a theory. This may only be a theory about the good life. That, though, would not be obviously sufficient to

determine whether the situation was also unjust because, arguably, people can lead bad lives without suffering injustice. For that, we need a theory about justice—or at least about injustice, if that would somehow be easier.

It might be suggested that we could just ask *everyone* whether they are fine or whether they are in a pit. This is rather difficult to take seriously. Do we ask our friends who seem to be living lives like ours whether they are in pits, even though we are happy leading the same sort of life? While there is nothing inherently wrong with doing so, it seems rather silly. What reason would we have to ask? Again, absent a theory about why they might be in a pit, we are simply grasping at straws. Perhaps that is all there is. Perhaps we can only ever grasp at straws.

If we must grasp at straws, we would be left with three options: ask everyone, ask no one, or ask some. Asking everyone seems overly burdensome. Asking no one risks turning us into uncaring and unconcerned misanthropes. Asking some is perhaps reasonable, but without a theory that provides some standard against which to decide whether to ask or not, we are left acting on impulse, instinct, or whim. It leaves us, in short, unable to say anything serious about injustice (or justice). Again, we seem to need a theory. It might be a theory of injustice rather than a theory of justice, but it must be capable of providing guidance.

It may be that Schmidtz is right that we can theorize about how real humans can and should interact without worrying about ideal theory. Nonetheless, I do not think we can just look at how we do better and how we do worse. Just as people disagree about what the peaks and pits are, they will disagree about what it is to do better or worse. Perhaps we can do without ideal theory, but some theorizing (and some level of idealizing) seems necessary to get past whatever biases we bring to our comparisons of better and worse.

## 7. Seeking a Plain?

I might agree that "there is no political peak" (p. 82). If that is true, I would agree with Schmidtz that "the fact remains that we can each have our own mountain to climb—our self-chosen moral peak— in which case justice is not well illustrated by a metaphor of us all climbing toward the same peak" (p. 82). It is not clear to me that this means we are all "[c]limbing out of the same hole," but I agree that "[t]reating justice as a duty to avoid pits rather than to converge on some utopian's imagined peak, allows us to be liberals" (p. 84).

Perhaps we ought to say the ideal is a plain or what appears from afar to be a plain but is actually a large field with many peaks (each with its own seekers) and many pits (each with its own avoiders). In any case, I do not see a way to show that any particular pit is worse than any other—at least no way that might not also be used to show that a particular peak is better than others. We want to climb one peak, avoiding various pits. Other people want to climb a different peak, avoiding various other pits. We might help them avoid their pits and they might help us avoid our pits. That may be more important than our helping them climb their peaks and their helping us climb our peak.

We ought not be like Smith's man of system who "exaggerate[s] how compelling our personal moral peaks can be to others and thus exaggerate[s] how central our visions can be as organizing principles of other people's lives in a diverse community" (p. 83). Nor ought we exaggerate how compelling a case there is to avoid our personal moral pits.

We ought to seek to live together in peace and prosperity, allowing all to try to climb their own peaks and, perhaps, helping each other avoid our own pits. Perhaps we ought to live together on this vast countryside that is more like a field with many peaks and pits. But then this just is the "peak." That is, it is the ideal we seek. It just may be feasible as well.

As I said at the beginning of this essay, Schmidtz and I are in broad agreement about the way the social order should be. One might reasonably wonder, then, whether any defense of ideal theory has practical import. I am not sure. I believe that too many believe there are no objective facts about the way the social order should be arranged. Even if the objective facts do not support a "thick" ideal of the way the social order should be arranged such that *every* society should be arranged that way, there will be objective facts about the way any particular society should arrange its social order (given its particular circumstances). Schmidtz would likely agree.

I worry that when some hear Schmidtz rejecting ideal theory, they will hear him as saying there are no such objective facts. We should not make that confusion. I tend to think there is a "thin" ideal that should be instantiated in every society, but instantiated in a way that is consistent with the contingent circumstances of each society. Schmidtz might accept that or might deny any need for the ideal, while still insisting that the circumstances of any given society at any given time suggest a limited set of ways to order that society that will be good for its people. I think we both rule out the rejection of objectivity

120

here altogether (see pp. 32, 69, and chaps. 18 and 19). Our agreement is thus more significant, at least for practical matters, than our disagreement.

My disagreement with Schmidtz comes down to this: He thinks we can completely do without ideal theory; I do not (or at least I am unsure). If we do not need it to know what justice is, we still need a theory to know what injustice is. Perhaps there is no peak to know; if not, we must know the pits.[16]

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