

## Ideal and Nonideal Theory: Untangling the Debate

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Received: March 20, 2014      Accepted: April 26, 2014      Published: May 12, 2014

doi:10.5296/ije.v6i2.5349      URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5296/ije.v6i2.5349>

### Abstract

In reviewing some of the literature, ideal and non-ideal theories are presented as opposing or at least competing theories, in the same manner as are liberal and progressive theories of education. Some scholars suggest that ideal theory ought to precede non-ideal theory, while others suggest just the opposite. This is referred to in the literature as ‘the priority objection.’ Some suggest we don’t need ideal theory at all and should exclusively use non-ideal theory. Others focus on how *this* scholar misses the point, *that* scholar leaves something out, or *this* scholar has it right and here’s why. My objective in this paper is to argue that aside from important and scholarly discussions, ideal theory and non-ideal theory are artificially polarized. Further, and more radically, characterizing ideal and non-ideal theories as two separate enterprises and as ‘theories’ are category mistakes. Not surprisingly, because of the artificial polarization and category mistakes, the debate is rather confused and stuck. This paper attempts to untangle the confusion and open up the dialogue.

**Keywords:** ideal theory; non-ideal theory; debate; education; category mistake; false polarization; procedural; substantive

## 1. Introduction

How might John Rawls view the current debate regarding ideal theory and non-ideal theory? Coining the terms, ‘ideal theory’ and ‘non-ideal theory’ as Rawls did, Valentini’s (2012) paper, *Ideal vs. Non-Ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map* appropriately defines and gives context to the debate. As she describes, ideal theory refers to a ‘utopian or idealistic theory,’ whereas non-ideal theory is more of a realistic theory (Valentini, 2012). Further, ideal theory focuses its aim at ‘societal perfection’ or the ideal, whereas non-ideal theory focuses its aim on improvements ‘without necessarily determining what the optimum is’ (Valentini, 2012).

Not a Rawlsian scholar, as many who have written on the subject certainly are, my interest in the debate is as an educator and is of a philosophical flavor. The debate is a serious one and I do not intend to trivialize its seriousness in my next remarks, but sometimes a neutral analogy helps one to think more clearly about an issue. At first I thought the debate to be a little like a disagreement over the better flavor of ice cream. Ideal theory is one flavor and non-ideal theory is another. This is superior to that. Pick one. Debates rooted in either/or conflicts rage on in several disciplines. Take the mind-body debate, for example, in Philosophy of Mind. And yes, it is still going on. You’re either a dualist or a monist. Or consider the Liberal-Progressive debate in education. You either teach subjects or teach kids (Sheppard, 2010).

In the untangling of ideal and non-ideal theory, three terms used in a similar debate in education are useful. In *School Engagement: A Danse Macabre*, Sheppard (2010) makes a distinction between the “substantive” and the “procedural” with respect to educational engagement. Drawing on the scholarship of Michael Oakeshott, Sheppard describes the distinction in the context of questions we must pose about education: ‘What is it that is worthwhile to know? (the substantive question) and how is what is worthwhile best achieved? (the procedural question)’ (Oakeshott, 2001). As will be discussed in detail, the substantive and the procedural distinctions help to clarify the so-called conflict in the ideal/non-ideal theory debate. Sheppard also alludes to another useful term, referencing the work of Richard Peters and Paul Hirst who characterize approaches to education as ‘artificially polarized’ (Sheppard, 2011). As Sheppard writes,

The liberal view is taken to be...the substance of education...what it is that ought to be taught to students. Progressive education...is concerned with educational pedagogy...how best to teach children. Although both views clearly address...‘what ought to be our educational priority?’ they have historically been perceived as exclusive alternatives in priority debates. Peters and Hirst claim that ‘the opposition between approaches to education represents an artificial polarization, a caricature of the alternatives open to teachers in performing their tasks’ (Sheppard, 2011).

In reviewing some of the literature, ideal and non-ideal theories are presented as opposing or at least competing theories, in the same manner as are liberal and progressive theories of education. Some scholars suggest that ideal theory ought to precede non-ideal theory, while others suggest just the opposite. This is referred to in the literature as ‘the priority objection.’ Some suggest we don’t need ideal theory at all and should exclusively use non-ideal theory.

Others focus on how *this* scholar misses the point, *that* scholar leaves something out, or *this* scholar has it right and here's why. My objective in this paper is to argue that aside from important and scholarly discussions, ideal theory and non-ideal theory are (as Hirst and Peters might describe) artificially polarized. Further, and more radically, characterizing ideal and non-ideal theories as two separate enterprises and as 'theories' are category mistakes (Ryle, 2009). Not surprisingly, because of the artificial polarization and category mistakes, the debate is rather confused and stuck. With gratitude for the reader's patience, it is helpful to torture the ice cream metaphor just a little bit more. Ideal theory and non-ideal theory are not competing flavors of ice cream. If what is called ideal theory is the ice cream, then what is called non-ideal theory is the cone. When we think about going for an ice cream cone, we don't think about going for the ice cream and going for the cone. The imagining of the experience is a unified one. This is important, as to meet my objective in the paper, I wish to make a related argument: to practice non-ideal theory (later described as implementation of the 'procedural-actions consideration') *is to have* an ideal theory (later described as the 'substantive-contextual consideration.')

As noted, artificially polarized terms and confused, stuck debates are not exclusive to political and moral theory - with Philosophy and Education, for example, suffering from these same maladies. Perhaps every discipline does. It cannot be over-stated how powerful is the language we create and use to express ideas. Once a label roots in academic discussion, it defines the course of further discussions – sometimes for generations. If our vocabulary is confused, the expressions of our ideas are confused, with far-reaching consequences. Sometimes we discover our confused vocabulary *created* the so-called problem/debate in the first place. At any rate, it is important to correct the mistakes as soon as possible. By unraveling from "afar" the problematic categorization of ideal and non-ideal theory (and some writers have certainly tried to do such unraveling) perhaps we can get *unstuck*. I say from 'afar' because I am new to the debate and as such, to use a crude expression, I have no dog in this fight. Occasionally new eyes can offer a *naïve lens* through which to examine an important issue.

## 2. A Survey of the Literature

The distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory originates from *A Theory Of Justice* by John Rawls. With his project being an investigation of the ideal, just society, Rawls (1971) describes how '[t]he first or ideal part assumes strict compliance and works out the principles that characterize a well-ordered society under favorable circumstances.' (Rawls, 1971). This he refers to as ideal theory. Non-ideal theory is that which 'asks how this long-term goal might be achieved...usually in gradual steps' (Rawls, 2001) or the 'courses of action that are...likely to be effective' (Rawls, 2001). As Simmons (2010) in *Ideal and Nonideal Theory* summarizes, '...ideal theory dictates the objective, nonideal theory dictates the route to that objective from whatever imperfectly just condition a society happens to occupy' (Simmons, 2010).

Some scholars call for an exclusive focus on non-ideal theory – the more practical of the two

theories, where the emphasis is on solving problems of injustice and improving every day lives of those suffering injustices (Schapiro, 2003; Sher, 1997; Murphy, 2000; Sen, 2004; Sen, 2006). In his review of Amartya Sen's, *The Idea of Justice*, Charles Barclay Roger (2010) identifies Sen's 'realization-focused comparative approach' over a 'search for a set of perfectly just first principles' (Roger, 2010). Given the disagreement on what constitutes the ideal, just society, we should use 'a comparative approach [where] we can at least arrive at widespread consensus on the injustice of certain practices or outcomes relative to others' (Roger, 2010). Sen's main point is that we need not waste time debating philosophical ideals to theorize about our non-ideal circumstances. Non-ideal theory advocate, Charles W. Mills (2005) more sternly critiques ideal theory. Writing in *Ideal Theory As Ideology* that ideal theory only benefits those in power, Mills argues 'ideal theory can only serve the interests of the privileged...who because of that privilege (as bourgeois white males) have an experience that comes closest to that ideal' (Mills, 2005). For such reasons and many others discussed in his paper, Mills asserts, 'nonideal theory is clearly superior to ideal theory' (Mills, 2005). In summarizing this stance, non-ideal theorists argue we must, 'address...issues of justice in the domain of nonideal theory before we worry over the details of some ideal theory or the grand metaphysical questions of abstract moral and political philosophy' (Simmons, 2010).

Other scholars suggest that before enacting a plan to address injustice we must *first* imagine the ideal, just society (Farrelly, 2007; Robeyns, 2008; Simmons, 2010). As Simmons notes, for non-ideal theory to be successful '...requires that we know how to measure success; and that measure makes essential reference to the ultimate target, the ideal' (Simmons, 2010). Further, he cautions, 'to dive into nonideal theory without an ideal theory in hand is simply to dive blind' (Simmons, 2010). Simmons points out that even Rawls himself in *The Law Of Peoples* stressed that '...until the ideal is identified...nonideal theory lacks an objective, an aim, by reference to which its queries can be answered' (Simmons, 2010). Referring to non-ideal theorists in general, but also anyone addressing injustice, Simmons writes that they '...have in mind, however vaguely, an ideal of justice toward which they take their campaigns to be ultimately directed' (Simmons, 2010). In summarizing this stance, ideal theory necessarily precedes non-ideal theory: '...the shape of our political ideal must be reasonably precisely specified before nonideal policies can be endorsed by a theory of justice' (Simmons, 2010).

Offering escape routes from the 'either-or/which-comes-first' constraints inherent in the priority objection, the debate seems re-examined by Schmidtz (1995; 2005), Jubb (2012), Stemplowska and Hamlin (2010). In *Theory, Ideal Theory and the Theory of Ideals*, for example, Stemplowska and Hamlin challenge Simmons's claim that ideal theory is a pre-requisite for non-ideal theory. Additionally, the authors advise a shift in focus from the vocabulary difficulties to the 'territory' which ideal and non-ideal theory should cover (Stemplowska & Hamlin, 2010; Swift, 2008; Valentini, 2009; Sreenivasan, 2012). Acknowledging the importance of the debate in *What's Ideal About Ideal Theory?* Stemplowska (2008) stresses it is only a productive one if 'we avoid treating ideal and nonideal theories as rival approaches' (Stemplowska, 2008). Pointing out that the theories do not conflict, and noting that each has valuable 'techniques,' Stemplowska (2008) suggests

both theories are useful: ‘the use of ideal theory techniques contributes to the use of nonideal theory techniques and vice versa’ (Stemplowska, 2008). Similarly shifting the debate from the vocabulary problems to solving problems, Robert Jubb (2012), in *Tragedies of Nonideal Theory*, highlights the need for ‘re-categorization.’ Recognizing the debate ‘...departs from a more sensible use which would categorize the two according to the problems they deal with and so obscures the distinctive character of their problems’ (Jubb, 2012), he ultimately sees a role for both theories. Like Stemplowska, who argues there is no conflict between ideal and non-ideal theory, Jubb (2012) suggests,

...my account of the difference between ideal and non-ideal theory...[describes] dividing the field up into distinctive problems...In doing so, I hope it has cleared and prepared the ground for turning to what is surely the most pressing problem, that of what to do in our non-ideal circumstances (Jubb, 2012).

Despite attempts to re-frame and re-situate the ideal/non-ideal distinctions, the distinctions persist and as a result, deeper problems persist. I think it can be agreed that the priority debate (ideal theory should precede non-ideal theory or vice-versa) cannot be settled – at least in its current frame. But I’m not convinced that moving past the vocabulary difficulties is the answer or even advisable. Both the priority debate and the vocabulary difficulties seem to me related symptoms of the same malady. Since the confused vocabulary used to make the distinction (which continues to confuse discussions) precedes and arguably creates the priority debate, it is hoped that untangling the distinction itself will render moot the priority debate.

I am mindful of Charles W. Mills’ suspicion of analytic philosophy (in its “privileged, dominant status”) offering useful contributions to the debate (Mills, 1997, 1998, 2005). Calling out anyone who asserts a false separation between the theories (that non-ideal theory is already “contained” within ideal theory), Mills (2005) writes this ‘mistaken move’ is,

...especially easy for analytic philosophers, used to the effortless manipulation of variables, the shifting about of  $p$ ’s and  $q$ ’s, in the frictionless plane (redux!) of symbolic logic—from the ease of logical implication to the actual inferential patterns of human cognizers who have been socialized by these systems of domination (Mills, 2005).

I am equally mindful of those who argue we must ‘focus on how social structures are actually working, not on how we imagine them working in thought experiments,’ (Schmidtz, 2011) and that the debate is in danger of becoming ‘...bogged down in the abstract realm of arm-chair theorizing’ (Simmons, 2010). That said, legitimate questions can and should be raised with respect to the mistaken assumptions rooting themselves in the vocabulary we use to discuss the ‘debate.’ To these, I cautiously and respectfully turn.

### 3. A Closer Analysis of the Distinction

Embedded in the claim that we need to address injustice, *necessarily* is a belief that there *is* a problem in the first place (injustice), and that it needs to be solved (or at least addressed) so

that things may improve. Similarly, embedded in the belief that there is a problem, *necessarily* is another belief that things are not as they should be -- they are ‘problematic,’ bad, unjust. Finally, embedded in the belief that things are not as they should be, *necessarily* is a comparison *to something* – namely, the way things *should be*. The fact that we think about how things *should be* is evidence enough that we hold an ideal, however young in its conceptual maturity it may be. As Lorella Terzi (2012) summarizes in *The Value of Philosophy for Educational Policy: Ideal Theory, Educational Principles, and Policy-making*, ‘when we actively attend to issues of justice...we have an idealized view in mind about what justice is and what it requires, however simple and ‘imperfect’ such an idealized view might be’ (Terzi, 2012).

It is certainly worthwhile to consider or ‘theorize’ what an ideal, just society is. Mills writes ‘all theorizing...takes place in an intellectual realm dominated by concepts, assumptions, norms, values, and framing perspectives that reflect the experience and group interests of the privileged group’ (Mills, 2005). I mostly agree but would extend his insight to *all* – not just the privileged. We all ‘theorize,’ which is to say *think about*, a better life, a better education, a better relationship, a more just world and in so doing, our imaginings are dominated by concepts, assumptions, norms, values and framing perspectives that reflect our experience and interests. In short, all of us engage in what Mills marks as exclusive territory of the privileged.

When I imagine an ideal, just society, I consider a place where people are treated with dignity, receive equal pay for equal work, and have equal access to education, to give just a few examples. When I imagine an ideal, just society, several things are certain:

- 1) The imagining requires I have a *comparative reference point* -- namely, that this action is just *compared to* that action which is not. If I believe undignified treatment of people is unjust, it requires I *first* have a comparative reference point that dignified treatment of people is just. In other words, to recognize an injustice is to recognize *the discrepancy between* what is currently happening or *what is the case*, and what should be happening or *what ought to be the case*.
- 2) The imagining takes place from my first-person, subjective perspective.
- 3) My subjective perspective is informed by my prior experiences. Though I may not be aware of the degree or extent to which this prior experience over that prior experience is informing my perspective, it is still a fact *that* my prior experiences are informing my perspective.
- 4) Some have a different perspective of a just society than I do. It is not the case that everyone in the world has the same perspective of a just society.
- 5) Like me, others’ perspectives of a just society are informed by *their* prior experiences.

Given my imagining here (and accompanying certainties) concerns the *substance* and the *context* of what the ideal, just society is, I will call this exercise the *substantive-contextual consideration* or the *substantive*. I will use this term, from time to time, in place of what is

referred to as ideal theory.

Along with considering what constitutes the ideal, just society (the substantive), it is also worthwhile to think about *how* to address and improve societal injustices. To use a prior example, suppose I believe people are not receiving equal pay for equal work, but I believe they should be in an ideal, just society. On a large scale, I might enact a plan organizing like-minded individuals to form activist groups, who would then lobby politicians, who would then enact public policy changes. On a smaller scale, I might enact a plan to raise public awareness by writing a letter to the editor of my local newspaper. When I imagine the various ways to address injustices, the five certainties previously noted apply. Given my imagining here concerns the *procedural steps* and *actions* I might undertake to get closer to an ideal, just society, I will call this exercise the *procedural-actions consideration* or the *procedural*. I will use this term, from time to time, in place of what is referred to as non-ideal theory.

It is important to note that the procedural *is part of* or at least *an extension of* the substantive, but they aren't separate enterprises. A simile from John Donne's love poetry, of all things, is quite helpful here. Consider a mathematical compass (a single 'thing') where one foot is fixed and the other moves. As Donne writes, 'If they be two, they are two so / As stiffe twin compasses are two, / Thy soule the fixt foot, makes no show / To move, but doth, if the'other doe' (Donne in Dempsey, 2013). The point of the simile is to show that if we insist on seeing 'two' (in the case of his poem, two lovers) we ought to see them as two *aspects* of one thing – the compass. Donne continues, 'And though it in the center sit, / Yet when the other far doth come, / It leans, and hearkens after it' (Donne in Dempsey, 2013). The substantive is the fixed foot of the compass. The procedural is the moving foot of the compass. The substantive and procedural are no more 'opposed' than the two feet of the compass are 'opposed.' Further, they *require* one another for action. Non-ideal theory scholarship stresses the importance of action in addressing social injustices. But this is not *in conflict with* ideal theory - just a part of it - a very important part, without which the ideal (or getting closer to the ideal) would be impotent.

I have suggested that *how* one goes about addressing injustices is necessarily rooted in one's personal perspective of the ideal, just society in the first place. As an example, given their different life experiences, it's possible that John Rawls' ideal of a just society is different from President Obama's. Given his different view of the ideal then, Rawls will have a different plan to achieve it (or get closer to it) than does President Obama. Notice that if both men do indeed have a different view of the ideal (the substantive), they necessarily have a different plan to get closer to the ideal (the procedural). The resolve, therefore, to *only* focus on the plan (as non-ideal theorists advocate) because there isn't agreement on the ideal doesn't make sense. Why? There isn't agreement on a plan either. The two *different* plans are rooted in two *different* views of the ideal. Put in a different way, both the substantive and therefore the procedural differ for each man. Further, and this is important, it isn't possible to *only* follow a plan to address injustice. This was pointed out in the review of the literature but it's worth repeating. I can't follow my action plan to address injustice (as non-ideal theorists suggest I do) without, at the same time, thinking about my view of ideal justice. To recognize

an injustice (which necessarily precedes my action plan to address it) *is* to have an ideal of justice in mind. As stated earlier, to notice an injustice first requires a comparative reference point. That I have a perspective on what is ideal isn't a problem. The problem is when I encounter your perspective on the ideal and *it is different from mine*. This is a problem because both the substance and context of our ideals will necessarily differ, and our prescriptions for the actions and procedures to guide those actions will necessarily differ. Mills stresses this point in the following example,

For many decades in the United States and elsewhere, *racial purity* was an ideal, and part of the point of anti-miscegenation law was to preserve the “purity” of the white race. ...the idea of black purity would have been a contradiction in terms. So there was a fundamental asymmetry in the way ‘purity’ was applied (Mills, 2005).

Mills's point is significant as he notes ‘people's social location may both blind them to important realities and give them a vested interest in maintaining things as they are’ (Mills, 2005). This is one of the reasons he argues non-ideal theory is superior to ideal theory. But the exclusive practice of non-ideal theory (the procedural) will not address the conflict. Consider, as Mills does, how the ideal of a just society from the perspective of an African-American differs, indeed is in conflict with, the perspective of a white supremacist. It is important to note that as repugnant, misguided and destructive the latter perspective is, it is not any of those things to the subject holding that perspective. Sadly, the moral disgust we may feel toward the white supremacist's view of the ideal, just society, doesn't mean it *isn't* his view of the ideal, just society. The important point is this. If both are interested in addressing injustice, it is *because they have an ideal* toward which they want to move closer. An exclusive focus on the procedural as a resolve isn't possible, as there are *two* plans to enact the procedural. More importantly, exclusive focus on the procedural isn't possible in the first place. Why? Because it supposes that we can think about the procedural in isolation of, or separate from, the substantive. It supposes that we can think about our action plan to address injustice without thinking about our ideal of justice. And we can't.

#### 4. Mistaking the Categories

Gilbert Ryle (2009) in *The Concept of Mind* notes that category-mistakes are made when ‘people who are perfectly competent to apply concepts...are still liable in their abstract thinking to allocate those concepts to logical types to which they do not belong’ (Ryle, 2009). Giving an example of the error, Ryle describes someone visiting Oxford or Cambridge for the first time who “is shown a number of colleges, libraries, playing fields, museums, scientific departments and administrative offices...[and then] asks ‘But where is the University?’” (Ryle, 2009). Ryle further explains, how the visitor must be corrected,

The University is not another collateral institution, some ulterior counterpart to the colleges, laboratories and offices which he has seen. The University is just the way in which all that he has already seen is organized. When they are seen and when their co-ordination is understood, the University has been seen. His mistake lay in



his innocent assumption that it was correct to speak of Christ Church, the Bodleian Library, the Ashmolean Museum *and* the University...as if ‘the University’ stood for an extra member of the class of which these other units are members. He was mistakenly allocating the University to the same category as that to which the other institutions belong (Ryle, 2009).

Ryle’s example is helpful to limn the mistake marking ideal and nonideal theory. As argued, non-ideal theory is best understood as an extension of or plan arising from contemplating the ideal. When “their co-ordination is understood,” ideal and non-ideal theories are *one* thing - not two different categories or two opposing categories.

With humility and due respect paid to Rawls’ genius, a related mistake may nonetheless be categorizing ideal theory and non-ideal theory as *theories*. In general, the word “theory” is often used to simply describe a perspective or frame through which we look at the world or analyze an issue. What is called ideal *theory* seems more a detailed description or thought experiment of the ideal. In the context of John Rawls’ expansive work, he describes the *features* of ideal justice and what it ought to look like in society. What Rawls is calling ideal theory is *Rawls’ perspective on what he thinks the features of ideal justice are*. That doesn’t make it a theory any more than *my* perspective (albeit a much less scholarly one) is a theory. This isn’t “just semantics” either. If a perspective and a detailed description are all that are required for a theory, then anyone who has a perspective and a detailed description of anything has a theory. This seems mistaken use of the term ‘theory.’ But mistaken use of terms has spawned and continues to spawn confused categories in debates.

When we think about a theory, we generally think of scientific ones, such as the theory of evolution. In this case, a theory usually consists of a set of claims, supported by empirical evidence. The empirical evidence used to support the claims made in a theory can then be falsified (or not) through observation, experimentation, and so on. Because of the evidentiary, empirical requirements of a theory, it works well as a tool to understand the physical world. Maybe that’s where the word, ‘theory’ should remain. I am not sure how well it works in the social sciences. In fact, its application and loose use may create far-reaching unintended consequences and confusions, as we have seen. Germs, gravity and evolution (all of which are the proper content of ‘theories’) aren’t like ethics, education and justice. The latter are abstract concepts (Barrow, 1990). Justice is not something we can identify and find in the physical world. As such, we might properly describe the *features* of a concept (such as justice) but not a *theory* of a concept. Like justice, the ‘ideal’ is a concept and in so being, we might properly talk about the features of a particular ideal but not a *theory* of ideal. Describing the features of a particular ideal (such as justice) is sufficiently dealt with in what I’ve previously described as the substantive-contextual consideration, or what can be referred to as the substantive part of an idea. This term can be applied to any discussion of an ideal, and more precisely captures what it is we are doing when we have such discussions.

The same can be said for non-ideal theory. In *Nonideal Theory: What It Is and What It Needs To Be*, David Schmitz (2011) writes, ‘[t]heories are not arguments, sound or otherwise. Theories are maps’ (Schmitz, 2011). Map, rather than theory seems to me a better

description of what scholars are talking about when they describe non-ideal theory. Namely, non-ideal theory is a map for how to get to the ideal, or at least closer to it than we currently are. While some theorists see the objective of non-ideal theory as illuminating injustice or as illuminating justice within fundamentally unjust circumstances, others see non-ideal theory more as a map or a tool to carry out the procedural. Again, this description can apply to any discussion of a plan to get closer to an ideal, and more precisely captures what is we are doing when we have such discussions.

## 5. A Final Thought

Returning to the introduction of this paper, where I allude to a similar debate in education: what is it that is worthwhile to know? (the substantive question) and how is what is worthwhile best achieved? (the procedural question), Sheppard's concluding comments aptly summarize arguments offered in the so-called ideal/non-ideal theory debate:

...each group uses the notion of educational engagement to justify its claims for the best approach to education...Rather than seeing these as conflicting approaches and battling over best approach, it is important that educators understand why both...views are necessary and that on its own, each is insufficient for achieving the desired goal of 'education' (Sheppard, 2010).

Having suggested that ideal theory and non-ideal theory are artificially polarized, are category mistakes and are improperly viewed as two separate enterprises, both are necessary and on its own, each is insufficient for achieving the desired goal of 'justice.'

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