Non-Ideal Philosophy as Methodology
The Case of Feminist Philosophy
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Abstract: This article argues that non-ideal theory is distinctive in its use of a certain methodology which is prior to specific topics (such as injustice, oppression, etc.), grounded in the idea of socially situated knowledge, and able to address ideological situatedness. Drawing on standpoint epistemology, we show that one’s social position within given power structures has implications for knowledge acquisition and that being in a vulnerable or marginalised position can be advantageous to knowledge acquisition. Following ideology critique, we argue that both marginalised and powerful social positions are embedded within a given ideology. As ideology is more than a mere set of attitudes or beliefs that social agents endorse or resist, situated agents and theorists cannot develop normative criteria that are not themselves situated. Hence, non-ideal theory has to be equipped with methods that are likely to make this situatedness visible. We close by presenting some diverse methods that already do so.

Keywords: critical theory, feminist standpoint theory, ideology critique, non-ideal theory, social epistemology, standpoint epistemology

Many, if not most, analytic feminist philosophers and critical philosophers of race, as well as many social and political philosophers, claim to engage in non-ideal theorising. While Judith Shklar (1990) had every right to the critique that political philosophy is merely interested in the concept of justice and generally assumes injustice to be nothing but the absence of justice, nowadays it is considered
good manners to subscribe to non-ideal philosophy. But what does it actually and precisely mean to engage in non-ideal philosophy? Although a few philosophers in feminist philosophy as well as social and political philosophy, such as Laura Valentini (2012) and Elizabeth Anderson (2013), have addressed the question (more on this below), many issues remain. Often it is assumed, without being argued for, that non-ideal philosophy is topic specific; non-ideal theory amounts to investigating injustice instead of promoting justice, looking at the world as it is and not as it should be, facing the complex structures of reality instead of an ideal state in some different world. In other words, what makes non-ideal theory distinctive is that it concerns the real world, its actual institutions, and its agents and knowers with all their limitations. Good non-ideal theory needs to work well in the actual world. We will argue below that non-ideal theory is not only characterised by its object — the actual world — but also requires certain methods to reveal the object in question.

Since Rawls introduced the notion of non-ideal theory in the 1970s, non-ideal theory has become a synonym for theories that reflect care about the problems of the unjust world and represent an attempt to provide guidance about what to do to ameliorate these unjust conditions. In her 2016 book *The Wrong of Injustice*, Mari Mikkola describes non-ideal philosophy as a departure from investigating justice and a turn to research about injustice as a feminist project (Mikkola 2016: 13–4). Similarly, Anderson (2013: 3) writes that her text sketches no ideal theory, but is instead concerned with contemporary social problems. And, Lisa Tessman, in the introduction to a philosophical anthology that uses the term ‘non-ideal’ in the title, states that feminist philosophy is non-ideal insofar as it concerns the actual world which ‘is marked by features of oppression’ (Tessman 2009: xiii). In this article, we argue that (a) non-ideal philosophy is distinctive in its use of a certain methodology and (b) this methodology is in an important sense prior to specific topics (such as injustice, oppression, etc.).

Very briefly, the underlying idea is that some methods obscure and others reveal important topics and issues. This understanding of non-ideal theory is contrary to the common assumption that non-ideal philosophy is merely a turn towards different topics insofar
as it is looking at problems of the real world. Non-ideal philosophy’s strength as a tool to investigate problems of the real world comes from its specific methodology. Furthermore, (c) non-ideal methodology is able to address ideological situatedness. Before we turn to explicate how we understand the notion of ideological situatedness and how non-ideal philosophy is best understood as methodology-specific (Section 3), let us briefly say a few words about the common distinction between non-ideal and ideal philosophy (Section 2). It is important to note, however, that we draw on arguments made by other non-ideal theorists instead of bringing new arguments to the table. Furthermore, while we are convinced that non-ideal theory is superior to ideal theory for at least some philosophical investigations, we do not attempt to argue against ideal theory here but are first and foremost concerned with what non-ideal theory (in distinction to ideal theory) amounts to. If the reader is familiar with those arguments but nevertheless convinced of the value of ideal philosophy, there is not much here that will convince them otherwise; in fact, this article primarily aims to address feminist and other non-ideal philosophers by arguing for a novel way of understanding what it is that non-ideal philosophy is doing. We close by drawing some interesting parallels to what we argue here with regard to non-ideal theory and the focus of some feminist philosophers on theory as emancipatory or liberating, such as bell hooks, Charles Mills, Margaret Walker, María Lugones, and Elizabeth Spelman (Section 4).

Non-Ideal Theory and the Real World

The departure from ideal theory and the turn towards non-ideal theory can be explained mostly by pointing to the fact that feminist and other social and political philosophers were deeply disappointed by ideal theory’s failure to say anything important about their own lives as female, black and brown, or disabled philosophers. Ideal theory – mainly criticised in its Rawlsian version – was simply not good in explaining any practical questions that were important to many, yet marginalised, philosophers. This can be seen, for example, in Valentini (2012), where she identifies three different interpretations of the distinction between ideal and non-ideal philosophy, all drawing
prominently on Rawls. According to Valentini, (1) ideal theory designates *absolute* compliance, while non-ideal theory is marked by *partial* compliance – not everyone, not anytime, according to non-ideal theory, follows all the rules and norms in exactly the way the theory prescribes; (2) ideal theory is a utopian or, to state the obvious, *ideal* theory, while non-ideal theory is a *realist* theory; and (3), ideal theory is an end-state theory, while non-ideal theory is a transitional theory, or as we prefer, a present-state theory. This is in line with Anderson, for whom non-ideal theory is conducted with the aim to reach a diagnosis about the current injustices and their historical trajectories in the real world, in contrast to theorising about an ideal state in a utopian or ideal world (Anderson 2013: 3).

Let us have a brief look at each of these distinctions respectively. The first distinction originates with the critique of Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* ([1971] 2003). Rawls presupposes (a) that all relevant social agents agree with the principles of justice that pertain to them, and (b) that natural and historical conditions are in general advantageous insofar as they imply that the society is socially and economically developed such that justice can be recognised by all (cf. Valentini 2012: 655). Several critics have argued that Rawls’s theory is at the very least questionable when used for situations in which some do not do what is expected of them (cf. Ashford 2003; Cullity 2004; Feinberg 1973; Miller 2011; Murphy 2003; Schapiro 2003; Sher 1997). After all, we are not only rational beings and we might neither agree with principles of justice nor recognise justice when it is presented. This is in line with Anderson’s argument that normative principles have to be tailored to our actual human motivations and cognitive capacities; were we to state principles that merely regulate the behaviour of completely rational and just creatures, these principles would likely fail to deliver the hoped outcome, considering our all-too-human weaknesses and flaws. To compensate for said weaknesses and flaws, we have to come up with principles that are capable of dealing with prejudices and other (problematic) flaws (Anderson 2013: 3–4). This does not even touch on the complicated question of whether what is presented actually is justice for each and everyone involved in our society. Furthermore, it is far from obvious what counts as rational in each and every context (cf. Simmons 2010; for a general debate, see Longino 1990).
The second distinction takes its cue from the debate between Cohen and Rawls. While Rawls argues that principles of justice are necessary as an answer to the *condition humaine* (Rawls [1971] 2003: §22) – and, thus, includes a realistic aspiration with his theory – Cohen argues that justice is merely one value among many and can therefore never be an answer to the question of what we *ought* to do. Instead, in Valentini’s words, ‘what we ought to do . . . depends on the appropriate balance between justice and other values’ (Valentini 2012: 657) plus feasibility constraints (cf. Cohen 2003, 2008). This second distinction is also influenced by a further debate. Many political philosophers, contra Cohen, have agreed with Rawls that it is necessary to have plausible normative and political principles, but that Rawls’s choice of which principles are important is hardly based on any relevant facts (cf. Valentini 2012: 658–60). These theorists critique Rawls’s theory for being too idealised insofar as the theory ignores important facts about real politics. Waldron, for example, argues that Rawls ignores the fact that political life is characterised by disagreement about justice (Waldron 1999). Others have argued that Rawls ignores the very real power inequalities and, hence, makes inadequate assumptions about human nature (cf. Geuss 2008; Mills 2005; Okin 1989; Williams 2005).

Finally, the third distinction can be traced back to Rawls again. Rawls argues that any non-ideal theory fails unless it is a transition theory and, thus, we already have an ideal theory in place. In other words, without at least a sketch of the ideal state, any non-ideal theory as a transitional theory misses an aim. While many agree with Rawls on this point, the argument is not undisputed. (cf. Valentini 2012: 660–1). Amartya Sen (2006), for example, responds by saying that a legitimate aim of non-ideal theory can be to make the world more just. If this is the case, aiming for a fully just and ideal world is misguided. An ideal of justice is neither necessary nor sufficient for non-ideal theory. Furthermore, as Anderson argues, ideal theory is sometimes even counterproductive as it can mask the injustices in our non-ideal world. An ideal state theory without any racial or gendered inequalities is not conducive to identifying such injustices in the world we live in. To see these inequalities, we are in need of a systematic theory that starts from the assumption that there are structural injustices pertaining to the existence of specific and deeply unequal social groups (Anderson 2013: 4–6).
These distinctions suggest that the importance of non-ideal theory lies in its possibility to identify real problems and injustices in the actual world, which ideal theory is likely to miss, and to delineate solutions to these specific problems. Iris Marion Young argues, for example, that a theory of justice that is independent of any real social context necessarily has to fail. This is because a theory that is universal and independent – and, hence, without point of reference – is too abstract to be helpful in evaluating actual situations (Young 1990: 4). If we attempt to understand the real world and aim to overcome problems and injustices within it, we should turn to non-ideal instead of ideal theory. Hence, the general idea is that non-ideal theory is attentive to flawed social agents, empirical investigations of the real world, and seeks solutions for social and structural injustices. This suggests that what is distinctive of non-ideal theory is its focus on the real world (including real and flawed agents and very real and deeply problematic injustices).

Instead, we want to argue that non-ideal philosophy is distinctive in its use of a certain methodology and that this methodology is, in an important sense, prior to specific topics (such as injustice, oppression, etc.) insofar as it reveals these topics. As many marginalised philosophers and theorists have argued, many methods are oblivious to real differences in power and the way in which injustices, oppression, and marginalisation work. In particular, methods used in feminist standpoint theory and Critical Theory that draw attention to our social positioning as both theorists and social agents are fruitful when we seek to unmask injustices in the real world, and non-ideal theory uses methods such as these to reveal what is problematic in the real world (more below). In fact, as we have shown above, ideal theory can mask injustices such that it becomes impossible to adequately understand and resist them. An understanding of non-ideal theory as distinctive with regard to its methodology is contrary to the common assumption that non-ideal philosophy is merely a turn towards different objects, insofar as it is looking at problems of the real world. To be exact, what we argue for is that non-ideal theory has a specific methodology which can be put to work by several (distinct) methods. The objective of a methodology is to determine the appropriateness of the methods applied with a view to investigating an object. It is a systematic strategy to find a solution to the research problem. Methods, on the other
hand, are tools or behaviour used to in a particular research project. In our case, the methodology of non-ideal theory is specific in that it should be able to address our social positioning as theorists and social agents, including ideological situatedness, while there certainly are different methods to do so.

What we (can) know and how we come to know what we know depends at least in part on our social position. Both standpoint epistemology and the idea of the situated knower are based on this extensively stated argument: Our social positioning creates so-called ‘common challenges’ (Pohlhaus 2012: 716); as knowers we find ourselves repeatedly in specific situations due to the social relations that we have in the world. Repeatedly experiencing these situations creates habits of expectation and interests as well as attention and concern (cf. Alcoff 2000, 2006; Collins 2008). These habits of interest and attention differ depending on our social positions. Furthermore, whether our habits of interest and attention attune to what is predominantly considered of interest and worth attention depends on our given power; as a result, some interests and experiences are better captured by our epistemic resources than others. Hence, our social position influences what parts of the world we deem important and what parts of the world we neglect or dismiss as unimportant, or which ones we simply do not perceive. Yet, epistemically speaking, it is not advantageous to be in a position of power. When we find ourselves in marginalised social positions and vulnerable to the power of others, we must not only find adequate resources to understand and describe our own experiences (which is much harder considering that the existing dominant resources are ill-equipped to capture these experiences) but must also know how those in powerful positions see the world and how they expect us to navigate within it. However, the reverse is not the case. In fact, Charles Mills (2007: 18) argues that white ignorance is part of a racialised social epistemology in which black and brown people are not seen at all; white people’s perception is tuned towards their own interests in which black and brown people do not play a role:

... when the individual cognizing agent is perceiving, he is doing so with eyes and ears that have been socialized. Perception is also in part conception, the viewing of the world through a particular conceptual grid. Inference from perception involves the overt or tacit appeal to memory, which will be not merely individual but social. As such, it
will be founded on testimony and ultimately on the perceptions and conceptions of others. The background knowledge that will guide inference and judgement, eliminating (putatively) absurd alternatives and narrowing down a set of plausible contenders, will also be shaped by testimony, or the lack thereof, and will itself be embedded in various conceptual frameworks and require perception and memory to access. Testimony will have been recorded, requiring again perception, conception, and memory: it will have been integrated into a framework and narrative and from the start will have involved the selection of certain voices as against others, selection in selection out (if these others have been allowed to speak in the first place). At all levels, interests may shape cognition, influencing what and how we see, what we and society choose to remember, whose testimony is solicited and whose is not, and which facts and frameworks are sought out and accepted (Mills 2007: 23–4).

Depending on our social position, some features of the world are more salient than others; these features correspond to our own experiences and our own interests, which are shaped by our socialisation. What we see and, more importantly, what we do not see or refuse to see is influenced by our social positions. Thus, social positions – that is, non-epistemic features of an agent – are important when it comes to knowledge-acquisition (cf. Haraway 1988; Harding 1993; Hartsock 1983; see also Kukla 2006; Rolin 2009; Toole 2019).

Similarly, both Helen Longino as well as Anderson have brought forward arguments for the complex relations between norms, facts, interests, and values in our scientific investigations. What we seek to investigate and how we go about our investigations is deeply connected with our social positions, our interests, and the questions that arise (Anderson 1995; Longino 1990). Hence, questions about method and questions about topics or objects cannot be considered independent of each other. Some parts of the world and some questions only arise when we choose a particular method or choose to investigate from a particular standpoint that allows us to step out of the above-described ignorance and direct our gaze elsewhere. Consider the example of feminist primatologist Linda Fedigan, who challenged the idea that male primates dominate female primates by pointing to other measures of individual dominance such as rank, strength, or group movement that apply to within-sex and not between-sex interactions (cf. Anderson 1995: 30). Premediated
assumptions of a patriarchal world order caused male scientists to be ignorant (in Mills’ sense) of these more complex forms of domination within sexes. Or consider the example of how (male) ignorance has for centuries masked what we know about the female orgasm (cf. Tuana 2004). This is why Sandra Harding (1993), for example, asks us to start investigation from the perspective of women’s lives.

This is implicit in the vague but common understanding of non-ideal theory as theory that pertains to injustices in the real world; we are interested in injustices and the ignorances that help keep injustices in place. What has not been made explicit within discussions of non-ideal theory so far is that a prerequisite for being able to look at these injustices and ignorances is the recognition that our knowledge and the perspective from which we seek knowledge is socially situated. In other words, what has not been made explicit is that non-ideal theory is necessarily grounded in the idea of socially situated knowledge as explicated in standpoint epistemology. What the implicit but nevertheless common understanding of non-ideal theory fails to bring into focus is the very fact that, because what we know and what we are interested in is influenced by our social position, we cannot just direct our gaze elsewhere without making a serious effort and having the right tools to do so. As Mills, Anderson, and Harding show, our social positions influence our interests, which in turn influence what we perceive and what we fail to perceive or dismiss; depending on our social position, we might not even ask the right questions or see what is right in front of us. Hence, unless non-ideal theory is theory only by and for marginalised thinkers and theorists,¹⁰ we have to choose methods that are able to overcome our ignorance, which implies that methodology is, in an important sense, prior to the object we seek to investigate. We now turn to our last claim, namely, that non-ideal methodology as described above is able to address ideological situatedness.

Ideological Situatedness

In the last section, we have argued that non-ideal theory is distinctive from ideal theory with regard to its methodology, and that this methodology is, in an important sense, prior to the topics or objects
with which non-ideal theory is commonly associated, such as injustice and oppression. With the help of standpoint epistemology, we have shown that we, as social agents, are socially positioned and that the particular position we find ourselves in has implications for our knowledge-acquisition. Furthermore, we have argued that some methods are better suited to see more of the world, while others leave us ignorant (in Mills’ sense). Next, we want to flesh out the claim that some methods are more likely to specifically address questions of injustice and oppression; we argue that non-ideal theory is distinctive with regard to its methodology insofar as its methodology is able to address ideological situatedness and, thus, allows us to acquire more adequate knowledge. We do so by pairing ideology-critical insights with standpoint epistemology. While both draw upon the Marxian insight that the social position which shapes our knowledge as epistemic agents is crucially defined by class (and other) structures of domination (Mills 2007: 14; Toole 2019: 3), ideology critique draws a direct connection between epistemic standpoints and ideological situatedness.

Social injustices are structural; that is, they are linked in important ways to our social position and our social relations with others and the world (Young 2001: 2; cf. Frye 1983: 15–6; Young 1990). This necessarily implies that we, as social agents, are part of it; depending on our particular social group membership and our relations to others, we are either privileged powerful or constrained in what we can do. Furthermore, due to the fact that most of our social positions are shaped intersectionally, we are often both privileged and constrained depending on the particular context we are in. For example, imagine a disabled white woman giving birth in a hospital: she will likely face biases and experience discrimination and/or epistemic injustice due to her disability, but receive credibility and recognition as a white person; that is, as a disabled white mother, she is socially constrained in many contexts due to her disability and her motherhood, but privileged due to her whiteness. The idea that follows is that we can both suffer and re-enact injustices at the same time and even within the same context. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that our social position and our identity have direct implications for how and to what extent we suffer from injustices and what we can do to resist them. And, as we have seen in the last section, our social position affects what we can know and
how we know what we know; feminist standpoint theorists have shown that social positions and power operate in relation, and that this is epistemically significant.

Critical Theory\(^\text{12}\) and other theories based on Marxian insights add to this by focusing on the way in which we are also ideologically situated. Roughly, due to our social positions and (class) relations we are ignorant of how the world really is. According to most Critical Theorists, we are all situated within an ideological structure.\(^\text{13}\) Because there is a wide range of theories of ideology – from ideology as belief-systems to ideology as social practices – we cannot explicate them in full detail here. We understand ideology as a form of consciousness that stands in relation to social practices; ideology is a practical form of consciousness.\(^\text{14}\) According to this understanding, ideology is a system of belief that is both induced by social practices and has practical consequences. One aspect of this concept of ideology is, in Rahel Jaeggi’s words, that ‘ideologies constitute our relation to the world and thus determine the horizons of our interpretation of the world, or the framework in which we understand both ourselves and the social conditions, and also the way we operate within these conditions’ (Jaeggi 2009: 64).

To illustrate, let us go back to Mills’ notion (even though Mills does not support our praxis-related understanding of ideology) that white ignorance, being in the grip of the ideology of white supremacy, causes white people to be ignorant of their own role as oppressors. While we have a practical form of consciousness that enables us to take part in and enact social practices and coordinate our behaviour in general, we (sub-)consciously naturalise and legitimise unjust social practices while participating in them. According to Marx, the practical form of consciousness of a society is determined by society’s economic conditions. As social agents within this society, we adapt to these economic relations that structure our lives and adopt a particular way of seeing the world and our place in it. In other words, the economic relations provide an image of what society is that gives meaning to our lives and our actions within it, an image which both motivates and rationalises our social positions. Here, the theory comes full circle: due to our social positions we experience injustices which we fail to understand adequately because of the given ideology, which then rationalise the very same social positions. If a society is overwhelmingly
structured according to unjust economic conditions, then our image of that society is necessarily shaped by false and distorted beliefs – about us, our interests, and the social conditions that surround us.

This idea can be extended such that it does not merely provide an understanding of our economic relations but of all our social relations (cf. Toole 2019): To successfully participate in social practices, we, as social agents, need to have an understanding of our place within society and an interpretation of the world in which we participate. Put boldly, successful socialisation is nothing but internalisation of said interpretation and our role within it such that we can smoothly operate within society. Depending on the social position we occupy in the structure, different rules and norms apply to us and are internalised to make sense of our role within the ideological structure. For example, it is part of the socialisation as housewife to internalise rules and norms specific to woman’s work within the household. Yet, being a housewife is but one role within the broader ideological structure, such that any housewife will also internalise general norms and rules of the structure – for example, racist, sexist, and capitalist ones. This implies that the internalisation of unjust ideological structures causes us to suffer from the very same structures that we help to enforce and enact. For example, even in progressive families and relationships – those that characterise themselves as equal and just – the majority of the emotional labour and reproductive labour is still part of the woman’s daily chore (Hochschild 2003).

If ideology is “instilled “in the hearts and minds of the individuals”” (Jaeggi 2009: 64; cf. Haug, Hall, and Pietilä 1984: 21), then ideology critique aims to unmask the very conditions that hold us in the grip of injustice and oppression. Yet, if we are all in the grip of the given ideology, questioning, critiquing, or resisting the very practices that make the ideology is far from easy. Importantly, while standpoint epistemology relates our social positioning within power structures to our knowledge acquisition and argues that, as we have shown in the last section, being in a position of power is often disadvantageous to knowledge acquisition but being in a vulnerable or marginalised position can be advantageous to knowledge acquisition, ideology critique investigates the ways in which we are all embedded within a given ideology. Hence, the basic idea is that – borrowing from Mills again – not only are white people ignorant about their role as oppressors within the ideology of white
supremacy, but black and brown people can, to some extent, also be ignorant about their role as oppressed. Here, we can see the particular conundrum that Critical Theory poses. Gaile Pohlhaus (as well as others) focuses on the (wilful) ignorance of the oppressors and argues that it is in their interest to uphold such ignorance as it masks the way in which the real world works and allows them to reproduce the power they enjoy over others. Yet, this view neglects both the way in which the oppressed are also part of the very same ideology and the way in which wilful ignorance is only part of the picture; after all, most of the social practices we enact that help to reproduce the problematic conditions are enacted routinely and unconsciously. Writing about the racial ideology of the United States, Barbara Fields remarks:

> When virtually the whole of a society, including supposedly thoughtful, educated, intelligent persons, commits itself to belief in propositions that collapse into absurdity upon the slightest examination, the reason is not hallucination or delusion or even simple hypocrisy; rather, it is ideology. And ideology is impossible for anyone to analyze rationally who remains trapped on its terrain (Fields 1990: 100; italics added).

Ideology, according to Fields, is ‘the descriptive vocabulary of day-to-day existence’ (ibid. 1990: 110); the same way we do not leave day-to-day existence behind, we do not leave behind the ideology. In fact, the very saying of ‘being in the grip’ of an ideology underlines the complexity of turning our backs to said ideology.

Yet, Pohlhaus is correct in drawing our attention to the fact that social practices, practical consciousness, as well as our epistemic resources are fragmented; we do not all use the same resources, believe in the same myths, and enact the same practices. Fields agrees when she writes that ideology is not a set of attitudes or beliefs that social agents simply endorse or resist, but it is a negotiated social terrain ‘whose map they keep alive in their minds by the collective, ritual repetition of the activities they must carry out in order to negotiate the terrain’ (Fields 1990: 113). This highlights two important insights: First, we can now see the direct link to social injustice and oppression because those in power have better means to negotiate the terrain to their advantage. Second, we can understand why ideological practices are enacted by those with power and those without; by ritual repetition of the internalised
practical form of consciousness, the very practices that are unjust are rationalised and masked such that they appear natural and unrelated to the hierarchical social order. This suggests that to become critical of the given status quo, what is needed is ideology critique. Ideology critique can come in different forms, but the method of immanent critique has proven useful for investigating ideology.

Critical Theory roughly distinguishes between three distinct forms of critique: external, internal, and immanent (cf. Jaeggi 2009 for an overview). External critique determines the standards for critique from an external point of view; yet, since ideology is holistic and we, as social agents and knowers, are situated within it, we cannot just step out and take a god-like-view on the very conditions that keep us in the grip of said ideology. In fact, this is the very point that feminist philosophers made with regard to standpoint epistemology: While classical epistemology assumed that knowers are generic, feminist standpoint epistemology focused on the ways in which our social positions relate to structures of power and the way in which knowledge is necessarily relational, brought about within social relations to others. Internal critique, on the other hand, is dependent on the moral (and, we might add, epistemic) resources of the very community in the grip of ideology and, thus, not sufficiently helpful in critiquing said moral and epistemic resources. Immanent critique as ideology critique provides at least three aspects that can help to critique unjust structures of which we are a part without having to assume that we can disentangle ourselves from said structures and hover as godlike creatures above the world. First, immanent critique is grounded in a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’, as Paul Ricoeur puts it; it points to distortions in our understandings of the world and our place within it, often through the help of what could be called moral ruptures. Second, immanent critique points to the specific situations that reveal gaps arising from the ideological narrative and the actual workings of said ideology in real life. Third, immanent critique links analysis and critique in an important sense; the general idea is ‘to criticize a state of affairs by analyzing it’ (Jaeggi 2009: 65). The fragmentation of our practices and our interpretation of the world provide a starting point for immanent critique insofar as they point us to a hermeneutics of suspicion and experienced contradictions and, thus, allow for an analysis of specific situations that can ground our critical
stance. For example, according to Young, our possibility to critically reflect stems from an experience of resentment:

Critical theory presumes that the normative ideals used to criticize a society are rooted in experience of and reflection on that very society, and that norms can come from nowhere else. But what does this mean, and how is it possible for norms to be both socially based and measures of society? Normative reflection arises from hearing a cry of suffering or distress, or feeling distress oneself. The philosopher is always socially situated, and if the society is divided by oppressions, she either reinforces or struggles against them. (Young 1990: 5)

Young argues, in line with what we discussed above, that social agents are situated agents; hence, our normative criteria cannot be deduced from a position external to society. In other words, as social agents within a particular society, we are embedded in this society and cannot take an external and critical standpoint. And the same holds for our normative criteria; as situated agents it is simply impossible for us to develop criteria that are not themselves situated. Thus, our attempts to theorise face two stumbling blocks: First, any theory or criterion we propose is being influenced by our social positions. As discussed above, social positions create ‘common challenges’. What we experience is constituted by these challenges and influences the way we approach and understand the world; that is, it influences what we take an interest in, what we notice, the kinds of questions we ask, and so on.16 This is what standpoint epistemology has made explicit. Second, our situatedness within the (ideological) social structure and the practical forms of consciousness that we adapt and that rationalise the injustice of said structure can prevent us from investigating the underlying conditions. This is what Critical Theory brings to the table. Yet, according to Young, the social structure is not holistic such that it yields the same experiences for everyone. Depending on our intersectional group memberships, we can come to have experiences that are not in line with the dominant narrative and the concepts we are given. In other words, we can come to have disruptive moments that fuel the need to think about the background conditions and, simply, the lives we live.

Disruptive moments or moral ruptures that lead to resentment can happen due to an experience that we have or because we witness
someone else’s problematic treatment. Disruptive moments exist in many forms: Catharine MacKinnon (1989) writes about the process of consciousness raising that feminist groups have used to talk about domestic violence, sexual violence, and sexual harassment in the 1970s; Axel Honneth (2004) talks about a moral rupture between our moral sentiments and the given dominant interpretation, while Miranda Fricker (2007) discusses the way in which concepts are formed to close gaps within the collective hermeneutical resource; Pohlhaus (2012) highlights the usefulness of marginalised epistemic resources; Marilyn Frye (1983) writes about the contradictions that women face with regard to sexuality; and Matt Congdon writes about the dilemma when someone ‘must articulate [their] grievance by drawing upon either authoritative yet inadequate conceptual resources or adequate yet non-authoritative conceptual resources’ (Congdon 2016: 820). These moral ruptures can fuel our suspicion of internal contradictions, which can then result in analysis and, thus, critique of the status quo – a critique that is necessarily directed against unjust and oppressive conditions due to its complex immanent structure.

What we want to say then is this: non-ideal theory – in comparison to ideal theory – is distinct in its specific methodology that is able to critique ideological structures of which the theorist is themselves a part. And, as we have argued above, the specific methodology of non-ideal theory is in an important sense prior to its focus on specific objects of inquiry, such as oppression and injustice, because these objects of inquiry only come into view when being tackled by methods that are likely to criticise ideological situatedness. We do not want to make a point here that ideology critique is the only method that can accomplish these; however, any method that is able to critique ideological structures necessarily includes (a) the view of marginalised and oppressed standpoints; (b) critical analysis of the status quo, for example, fuelled by suspicion and moral ruptures; and (c) reflection of one’s own social position as theorists. Any method that includes the aforementioned insights can be fruitfully used in the quest of engaging in non-ideal theorising and, thus, count as non-ideal methodology. Before we close, we want to draw attention to some examples of non-ideal methodology in the sense that we have argued for.
Examples of Non-Ideal Methodology as Standpoint Reflexive and Ideology-Critical

Interestingly, the following examples of non-ideal theory grounded in a specific methodology as outlined above share one interesting insight: they are all calls for an engagement with theory as emancipatory. First, Mills takes a step further the argument that ideal theory is incapable of analysing injustice and oppression adequately, arguing that ideal theory is itself ideological. According to Mills (2005: 167), not all versions of ideal theory are problematic; for example, it is not objectionable when we use ‘ideal’ in the form of referring to normative, prescriptive, or evaluative criteria or when we use ‘ideal’ in the sense of a descriptive model. However, when we use ‘ideal’ in the sense of an idealised model, we’re doing something problematic. 18 Here we concentrate on an idealised example of what an object should be like; it is, in Mills terms, a ‘significantly false’ abstraction. According to Khader, this is not the only way in which idealisation can go wrong. We can also idealise about a set of social relations, a person, or an object by highlighting the wrong features or assigning the wrong weight to them (Khader, n.d.). And, again, this connects nicely to the insights from standpoint epistemology and Critical Theory; due to our specific social position we are partly blind to aspects of the world that do not concern us and can, thus, value the wrong aspects in our theories. In fact, if what we have argued for is correct, then the wrong methodology makes it impossible for us to see all parts of the world for what they really are and attach value to the right aspects.

Mills comes to the same conclusions: If we want a theory that is capable of guiding our actions and behaviour and that helps to critique and change the background conditions of the social world, we should not opt for ideal theory as idealising theory due to its masking effects. In fact, Mills says that ideal theory is not only not helpful, it is antithetical to moral theory (Mills 2005: 170). Ideal theory is itself an ideology insofar as it ignores a wide range of interests and experiences of marginalised people and instead overestimates the interests and experiences of a small but privileged group of white men.19 By doing so, ideal theory itself becomes an interest of this privileged minority and steadily builds the world as we see it from the perspective of a small group only (Mills 2005: 172; see also
MacKinnon 1982). As Mills remarked in his critique of Rawls: ‘Can it possibly serve the interests of people of color to ignore the centuries of white supremacy, and to pretend that a discourse originally structured around white normativity now substantively, as again just terminologically, includes them? Obviously not’ (Mills 2005: 172).

bell hooks, without being concerned with the theoretical distinction between non-ideal and ideal theory, argues that theory can be a liberatory practice if related to standpoint epistemology. hooks writes that

... I found a place of sanctuary in ‘theorizing’, in making sense out of what was happening. I found a place where I could imagine possible futures, a place where life could be lived differently. This ‘lived’ experience of critical thinking, of reflection and analysis, because a place where I worked at explaining the hurt and making it go away. Fundamentally, I learned from this experience that theory could be a healing place (hooks 1994: 61).

For hooks, theory can be liberatory when it is carefully chosen with the aim ‘to understand both the nature of our contemporary predicament and the means by which we might collectively engage in resistance that would transform our current reality’ (hooks 1994: 67). Yet, theory can only be liberatory when it is able to educate in a language that can be understood, when it serves the interest of marginalised social groups, and when its theorists are aware of their social positions and the injustice that surrounds them. Theory then is inextricably linked to practice, to the effort of not being silenced, of resistance, of given personal testimony about our own experiences. By starting from our own personal experiences, from our own pain, we can ground theory that helps us understand our social practices and our role within them. Here again we can find the idea that moral ruptures and internal contradictions in the form of (painful) experiences can yield both a critical reflection of the theorist’s standpoint as well as their embeddedness in a problematic ideology that has to be critically analysed to give room for resistance; in MacKinnon’s words ‘we know things with our lives and we live that knowledge, beyond what any theory has yet theorized’ (hooks 1994: 75).

Margaret Urban Walker argues against a historically specific model of ethics and moral theory and for an ‘expressive-collaborative’ conception of morality that can be both politically self-conscious and
reflexively critical. Moral theory that counts as paradigmatic – the kind of theory that Kant and Rawls engage in – is ‘a codifiable (and usually compact) set of moral formulas (or procedure for selecting formulas) that can be applied by any agent to a situation to yield a justified and determinate action-guiding judgement’ (Walker 1992: 28; emphasis in original); such a theory assumes that morality is a general and systematically unified type of knowledge that guides our actions (what Walker calls the ‘theoretical-juridical model’). Yet, morality in this sense fails when applied to contexts of personal relationships, of care-taking or situations that demand improvisation and sensitivity. Instead, Walker argues for a new conception of morality according to which morality is a social medium that helps to construct and define our social life by moral negotiation and accountability (Walker 1992: 32). Here, moral theory becomes a terrain that is negotiable, where each negotiation starts by reflecting our own social position, our relations, the particular context we find ourselves in and our accountability to ourselves and others. Hence, moral theory asks us to critically engage with who we are and where we come from, and by doing so it opens a theoretical space for thinking about political legitimacy, social values, and individual and collective responsibilities (Walker 1992: 34).

María Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman discuss the ways in which feminist theory as a response to the silence and exclusion of women within patriarchal social structures has itself excluded and silenced women who were not white and middle class. Instead of theorising about others by giving a descriptive account of what the other is doing, thus being an outsider who theorises about an insider, only a ‘genuine and reciprocal dialogue [that] takes place between “outsiders” and “insiders”’ (Lugones and Spelman 1983: 577) can become a trustworthy outsider account; here, both interlocutors become outsider and insider in relation to the other and can therefore help to learn both about the other and oneself. Importantly, though, women of colour are better prepared for this form of dialogue than white women, as their vulnerable social position forced them to learn both about themselves and white women as their oppressors (a point that we have discussed above). A theory-dialogue would help to make people who are the subject of the theory an intimate part of the theory. Lugones and Spelman continue to argue that theory can be helpful if it unmask...
how one is located in the world, how one is (or is not) responsible for being in that location, and how the world could be understood to make room for resistance to its injustice (Lugones and Spelman 1983: 578–9). However, even this form of theory as dialogue raises questions about the motivations for theory and who will most likely benefit from it; and so, it is far from settled that any theory can help in an emancipatory quest such as feminism. Yet, in these questions, we can see familiar aspects such as the importance of a relation between epistemic standpoints and social position in knowledge acquisition and the ways in which critical reflection has to raise consciousness about the status quo by speaking with another, the general idea being that as white women, we have to learn about others by learning about ourselves first, and that this learning requires openness (to criticism), self-questioning, and circumspection (ibid. 1983: 581).

Concluding Words

We have argued that (a) non-ideal philosophy is distinctive in its use of a certain methodology and (b) this methodology is, in an important sense, prior to specific topics (such as injustice, oppression, etc.), the underlying idea being that some methods obscure and others reveal important topics or objects and issues. Furthermore, (c) non-ideal methodology is able to address ideological situatedness. Hence, any method that is likely to do so is rightly described to fall under non-ideal methodology. This understanding of non-ideal theory is contrary to the common assumption that non-ideal philosophy is merely a turn towards different topics or objects insofar as it is looking at problems of the real world. In fact, non-ideal philosophy’s strength as a tool to investigate problems of the real world comes from its specific methodology. For example, Mills’ claim is more complex than merely saying that Rawls was not interested in racial oppression.

Instead, as we have shown, he brings forward an argument according to which ideal theory is not capable of the necessary critical reflection – both about the theorist’s own situatedness and that of others – and, thus, to address injustice and oppression or to have a conclusive theory of justice. This is not because ideal theorists merely fail to take an interest in problems of the real world, but
because their methods prevent them from taking an interest. And this theoretical turn that we have argued for is in good company, as we have shown in the last section; while not being investigated to understand the distinction between non-ideal and ideal theory – a distinction that became popular only recently – many critical and feminist theorists have explicitly turned to aspects that can also be found in standpoint epistemology and Critical Theory to call for an emancipatory form of theory.

To conclude, we can now say that understanding non-ideal theory as primarily methodology-specific includes two important insights: First, it provides us, as feminist and critical philosophers, with a manual for how to conduct theory. As a first step, we have to critically reflect our social positions and acknowledge the epistemic limitations that come with it. As a second step, we have to confront these limitations by inviting others into the discussion; we have to especially invite marginalised theorists and agents into the conversation when we speak from privileged social positions. Yet, inviting others into the debate should never mean to epistemically exploit others, that is, we have to invite and credit others for their valuable input. As a last step, we have to value other voices and insights and adapt our theories in light of them. Second, unsurprisingly, according to this manual, many feminist and social philosophers are already engaged in non-ideal theory understood as methodology-specific theory.

We began this article by saying that non-ideal philosophy is shorthand for philosophy that cares about the problems in the unjust world. We can now say that many feminist philosophers are in the business of non-ideal theory as methodology-specific despite their often (narrower) characterisation of their work as non-ideal theory as an object-specific approach; in other words, they do more than they actually say they are doing. Hence, the manual provided here also provides detailed insight into what feminist and social philosophy is often already doing.

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Notes

1. We speak of objects of investigation (instead of content of investigation or topics) to highlight the distinction between method and object, the first being the tools with which we investigate particular objects, the second being the thing under investigation. Others might prefer ‘content’ or ‘topic’ and we have no strong disinclination against either one.

2. We are here concerned with non-ideal (political) philosophy in a narrow understanding. Note that there is a broader understanding, where some contrast ideal normative theory with naturalized theory and consider the latter ‘non-ideal’ insofar as its focus is on the ways in which real knowers and agents can function in the real world – for example, the contrast between normative analytic epistemology and naturalised epistemology. Furthermore, the assumption that non-ideal theory is merely characterised by being applicable to the actual world fails to draw a distinction between non-ideal theory and applied philosophy, the latter being philosophy that is concerned with real-life-phenomena.

3. Interestingly, in her introduction, Tessman refers to Mills’ powerful analysis of ideal theory as ideology (Mills 2005), but truncates Mills’ explication of the non-ideal to nothing but a turn to ‘the workings of oppression’ that aims ‘to transform actual, non-ideal, unjust societies into more just societies’ (Tessman 2009: xvii).
Yet, as we will show further on in this article, Mills is one of the notable few scholars who brought forward a theory that focuses on non-ideal theory as more than content or object specific.

4. We make a distinction between method and methodology; methodology refers to a particular way of engaging with the world, while method refers to specific tools with which to do so. Here, non-ideal theory is understood as a particular methodology that is self-reflective and critical and can be satisfied with a range of methods, for example, immanent critique, feminist standpoint theory, etc.

5. We should note that we follow Rahel Jaeggi’s use of ideology as well as of ideology critique in this article, which we explain in more detail below.

6. According to the distinction between end-state and transitional theory, a theory is strictly speaking not a transitional theory without an ideal future state; transitioning implies the existence of something ideal for which we strive. Non-ideal theory would then be a theory that works ex-negativo. However, one could then remark that Valentini follows Rawls insofar as Rawls himself already argued that non-ideal theory merely describes the transition towards the ideal of an ideal theory. In other words, Valentini implies here that non-ideal theory is necessarily in need of an ideal theory insofar as it is merely the transition to an ideal end-state. Thus, we propose that the third distinction should be understood as a distinction between end-state theory and critical present-state theory and not, as Valentini proposes, between end-state theory and transitional theory.

7. This implies that the notion of ideal takes on different roles within ideal and non-ideal theory. While ideals within ideal theory are set as norms or principles according to which any society or community can be evaluated, ideals within non-ideal theory exist only in regard to real problems and have to be tested in their application. In other words, ideals as proposals for specific solutions have to prove themselves in life praxis.

8. The attentive reader might now object by saying that Rawls argues we cannot even see injustices in the real world unless we have an ideal of a just world (Rawls [1971] 2003). Here, we side with Sen (2009) and reply that, for a theory of how to make the world more just, we don’t need to know what it would be like when it is fully just. We’ll not go into this debate any further but rather assume that the reader who is familiar with feminist philosophy is already familiar with this discussion and, if not persuaded by many arguments made in favor of non-ideal theory like the ones by Sen, will not be persuaded by us either.


10. While we have argued above that marginalised social positions are advantageous to knowledge-acquisition, this is – as will become obvious in the following section – not a given; rather, marginalised social positions have better access to knowledge about more parts of the world.

11. Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the term ‘intersectional’, building on black and brown women’s knowledge about their own experiences, to describe the multiple interacting forms of discrimination. According to intersectional theory, individuals can suffer from more than one form of discrimination depending on their social position; for example, black women suffer both from racism and sexism. Importantly, though, to understand the particular oppression that black women suffer from, we cannot merely add sexism to racism or the other way round; rather, the intersection of these forms of oppression creates a new form. See Crenshaw (1997); Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013).

12. It has been argued that Critical Theory falls outside the divide between ideal and non-ideal theories (Stahl 2013 b): It shares the critique of ideal theory in that it rejects the idea that there is a unique set of principles for an ideal just society to be found through abstraction from the imperfections of current social conditions; but
it does not follow that the consequence of non-ideal theory (of the Millsian type), i.e. the rejection of abstraction-as-idealization, forces Critical Theorists to become negativists. The main idea of Critical Theory is that we should draw our social critique from within the struggles of the real world while at the same time orienting this critique towards a society in which given limits to our (epistemic) capacities are absent. Here, we are not arguing for one or the other position, but merely want to focus on the idea that ideology critique (in its broad understanding) is a necessary component of non-ideal theory.

13. See also Frye (1983: 14) for an account of women’s oppression as internalised and self-monitored.

14. Our practice-related definition of ideology disagrees with an understanding of ideology as a relatively explicit set of distorted claims or beliefs that purport to justify a morally problematic social order. On these accounts, the epistemic failings of an ideology can be identified through ordinary epistemic critique. We follow the arguments made by other advocates of the practice-related concept of ideology (Celikates 2016; Haslanger 2021; Jaeggi 2009; Stahl 2013 a) that epistemic critique alone is not enough for two reasons: a) it cannot grasp that in the social domain shared beliefs can make themselves true, and b) we need to pay attention to the ways in which epistemic and moral wrongs are connected.

15. A complex theory about such gaps or moral ruptures can be found under the notion of ‘internal contradictions’; here, we will work with a rather intuitive understanding of such ruptures and gaps instead.

16. For a general feminist discussion of how our theories are shaped by our social positions, see, for example, Harding (1991, 2015).

17. It should go without saying that the way in which we, as philosophers, handle resentment regarding our own experiences is different to the resentment we might feel for the experiences of others. To give a proper analysis of this difference, we would need to investigate the extent to which we can have resentment for the treatment of others and whether this can lead to critical thinking. This becomes especially important in light of ideological structures in which witnessing the problematic treatment of others might nevertheless not result in resentment, as the practical forms of consciousness provide a rational explanation, which is why one might feel tempted to think that only one’s own experiences can give rise to resentment in a form which is emancipatory. For now, we merely assume that this is not the case and that due to the fragmentation of the structure and the ability of resentment to travel from one problematic experience to another, we can feel resentment regarding both our experiences and others’. See also Celikates (2009) on the necessity to develop critical reflection tools.

18. Serene Khader is working on a similar and very powerful claim arguing that feminist non-ideal theory explains the centrality of standpoint and genealogy to feminist philosophy and, by doing so, offers an account of non-ideal theory that captures what many feminist philosophers want non-ideal theory to do. See her manuscript.

19. While Mills uses ideology in a different sense to what we discussed above, we can nevertheless see the similarities of thoughts here. Mills uses ideology in the sense of a hermeneutical construct – theory is ideological – while we use it in the sense of a model of the social structure, within which we, as social agents, are situated. Yet, both Mills and we stress the fact that only non-ideal theory that takes its cue from standpoint epistemology can unmask the interests of marginalised groups instead of assuming homogeneous interests of all.


21. Interestingly, in a paper on inequality (Anderson 2010), Anderson draws a distinction between luck egalitarians and relational inequality theorists, stating that
the first engage in research from a third-person standpoint, while the latter use a second-person standpoint. In many respects, this distinction and characterisation is close to what we have proposed for the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory.

References


