Reply to Critics of *The Imperative of Integration*

Elizabeth Anderson

University of Michigan

Lawrie Balfour, Benjamin Hertzberg, Jack Knight and Cara Wong offer comments on my book, *The Imperative of Integration*, that raise critically important questions about the ways a pragmatist methodology should treat ideals in non-ideal theory. In this article, I reply to their comments as well as provide some reflections on the proper level of abstraction in non-ideal theory and on what kinds of results we can expect from it.

Keywords: racial integration; democratic theory; non-ideal theory; social inequality; racial segregation

I thank my critics for their thoughtful and insightful comments on my book. Issues of methodology, particularly the place of non-ideal theory, loom large in their comments. Hence it is appropriate to begin with Jack Knight's contribution, since he offers the most systematic discussion of non-ideal theory. We share a pragmatist orientation. In general, pragmatists have spent far more time talking about methodology than putting it into practice. This misplaces priorities, since pragmatists hold that methodology is vindicated by showing what it achieves in practice. For this reason, my book stresses showing over saying what pragmatist methodology does. Knight does a superb job of articulating aspects of our shared methodology that remain implicit in my book.

Knight's insightful discussion illuminates two distinctions, which I unfortunately did not draw in my book: first, between abstract moral principles and ideal-typical models of institutions, and second, between ideal-typical models and their concrete realization under particular empirical conditions. Consider abstract principles first. Many philosophers aspire to discover normative principles that purport to be true in all possible worlds, regardless of the facts (Cohen, 2003). Such principles might be for conduct – for example, the principle of utility, or Kant's categorical imperative. Or they might be purely evaluative – for example, the luck egalitarian principle that it is bad if anyone is worse off than anyone else due to brute luck. I don't think we should place any confidence in our ability to arrive at such principles, supposing they existed. Even if we could do so, all of the hard work would still remain in figuring out how to apply them in practice (Dewey and Tufts, 1981 [1932], p. 178). In the process of extreme abstraction to supposedly pure principles, and then moving back down to application, we also risk missing out on normatively significant problems and questions of feasibility, and tend to skip over the hard but indispensable work of providing an institutional analysis of our problems (Anderson, 2010, pp. 3–6).

At a lower level of abstraction, some theorists advance ideal principles such as equality of opportunity and color-blindness. Such principles presuppose certain background institutions. The principle of equality of opportunity presupposes a division of labor with

different benefits attached to different occupations, and a labor market able to draw talent from mobile workers across a geographical region. The principle (unlike the ideal) of color-blindness presupposes the existence of racial identities. Although theory at this level of abstraction presupposes institutions, normative justifications of such principles generally set aside questions of how such principles could be institutionally embodied, whether this is feasible, or whether it would be desirable to institutionalize them once we examine what this would require. Notoriously, the principle of equality of opportunity is incompatible with anything resembling current family structures, and perhaps any feasible childrearing arrangements, but little work has been done thinking through a reassessment of the principle in light of these facts, or in analyzing what it would really take to institutionalize it or some more acceptable successor principle.

Knight correctly argues that pragmatists prefer to work at a still lower level of abstraction, with ideal-typical models of institutions. These are what I call 'ideals' in my book. We have ideals of things such as free markets and democracy, which may be complex and include sub-ideals. For example, democracy includes an ideal of equal citizenship. I propose an ideal of integration as a constitutive ideal of democracy. The normative justification of such ideals depends on their consequences. Hence, ideal types need not only satisfy normative desiderata (the consequences they are predicted to deliver must be good), but also explanatory ones: the ideal type needs to model adequately key causal powers and tendencies of its actual instantiations, under specified conditions. Such ideals can therefore be tested in practice.

The concrete institutional embodiments of ideal types include many contingencies and empirical limitations. Ideals are multiply realizable; particular realizations exhibit path-dependency and other constraints. What we actually test in practice are not the ideals directly, but their institutional embodiments under particular conditions. A major analytical task is to figure out enough about how institutions work to attribute desired or undesired consequences to the ideal type we are trying to realize, or to contingent features of the practice or its background conditions that we might be able to change. Such causal attributions are themselves susceptible to further rounds of testing, in the course of which we may refine our ideal types through greater specification. (Think, for example, of how ideals of democratic representation are refined and more fully specified once we include political parties in our models of democracy.)

It follows that ideals are always works in progress, and that initial experiments in particular ideals may properly lead to the refinement rather than the rejection of an ideal if the first attempt at implementation fails. In my book, I illustrate this point through an examination of initial post-Reconstruction understandings of what equal citizenship would amount to for freed people in the United States. Initial understandings supposed that the relevant ideal of equality would include equality of civil rights without equality of political rights or the vote. That turned out to be an illusion: there could be no real equality of civil rights without equality of political rights. This expanded our ideal of equal citizenship in ways that also fostered the struggle for women's suffrage (Anderson, 2010, pp. 89–95).

Similar points could be made about the ideal of free labor. The abolition of slavery was initially anticipated to mark a triumphant crossing from slavery to freedom in the

organization of labor. As we now know, the passage of the 13th Amendment only initiated the struggle for a fully free labor regime rather than marking its achievement. This was not only due to massive resistance by former slaveholders intent on re-imposing the functional equivalent of slavery on freed blacks. Continued political struggles against former slaveholders also highlighted injustices in the legal regime regulating supposedly free white laborers. Members of all races have litigated claims under the 13th Amendment, and have pressed for numerous other laws protecting workers. The struggle for free labor is continuing even to this day, as is manifest in workers' claims against employer governance of their lives both on and off the job, with respect to sexual autonomy, access to contraception, privacy, freedom of speech and political activity, and so on.

Benjamin Hertzberg rightly argues that ideals, to perform their critical function, need to abstract and idealize. Knight's discussion of ideal types explains how non-ideal theory treats abstraction and idealization in a disciplined way. Hertzberg also argues that ideals need to stand at some critical distance from hypothetical solutions to problems because what counts as a problem is dependent on the normative content of the ideal, which may be controversial. I agree with Hertzberg that the articulation of problems is dependent on ideals that are often controversial. The ideals of democracy, free labor and racial integration have long been sites of contestation and remain so today, even among those who nominally sign on to them. Hertzberg objects that my analogy of non-ideal theory to medical diagnosis of health problems fails to reflect this since health is an uncontroversial ideal and what counts as a health problem follows clearly from this ideal. To be sure, health is a more fully specified and consensual ideal than many political ideals, but even here there are controversies: for example, whether being medically 'overweight' is unhealthy, whether disabilities are innate defects of individuals or products of ill-adjusted institutions, and whether people who express transgender identities are mentally ill. The differences between ideals of health and other normative ideals are more a matter of degree than of kind.

More importantly, Hertzberg wants political theory to support ideals in a more utopian mode than what can be supported by investigating already felt distress by subjects on the ground. Sometimes the *status quo* starts feeling problematic only against a novel ideal that might not be proposed as a practical alternative, but as an evaluative point of view from which to cast a critical light on society. Rousseau's romantic ideal of the noble savage exemplifies this strategy: the point is to see how corrupt and diminishing civilization is, where everyone lives through the eyes of others, by contrast with an ideal of the psychically self-sufficient individual who lives without envy or spite towards others. Yet Rousseau's prescription for the distress generated by our recognizing the gap between our current condition and his romantic ideal is a democratic one in which the need for recognition is not transcended, but rather satisfied in a society of equals.

Hertzberg identifies an interesting role for ideals of this sort in political theory – namely to criticize those who claim to uphold such ideals, but disregard what it would take to realize them. Hertzberg objects that I neglect the critical uses of purely evaluative ideals, and in particular of the color-blind ideal, which could be deployed to bring its advocates on board with my integrationist project. I'll speak first to the particular claim, and then to the general one. While Hertzberg may be right that a critical use of the

color-blind ideal might bring around its advocates, I worry that invocation of the ideal invites conceptual and normative confusion. This is why, in my book, I disaggregate the color-blind ideal by distinguishing several concepts of race operative in current practice to which we might become blind, and show that each points to a very different normative concern. I thus replace the critical function of the color-blind ideal with several more precisely articulated ideals, while showing why its deployment against integrative programs such as affirmative action is confused (Anderson, 2010, pp. 157–177).

Is there a general role for utopian critical-evaluative ideals in political theory? I am not confident in armchair speculation about what a perfect society would involve. Normative judgments may be used to guide either conduct or feeling. If they guide conduct, they are practical; if they guide feeling alone, they are purely evaluative. Most philosophers test purely evaluative judgments in thought experiments: we imagine the state that is judged to be good, and consider whether we intuitively like or approve of it. However, from a pragmatist point of view, the ultimate evidence for evaluative judgments lies in actual experiments: how would we feel about the state if we actually experienced it (Dewey, 1976 [1915], pp. 16–17)? The difficulty with thought experiments is that we are not very good at forecasting our feelings about not-yet-experienced states (Gilbert, 2006). The history of politics is littered with attempts to realize imagined utopias that turned out badly, not just because of unforeseen consequences, but because anticipated consequences that people imagined would be wonderful were experienced as horrible in real life.

I'm not knocking the role of dreams in politics. Visionaries have often played powerful, positive roles in history, inspiring people to aspire to progressive ideals not imagined before. It isn't clear to me, however, that the academic political theorist is in a good position to generate them. Dreams can neither be deduced nor justified from theoretical principles or methods. This is why I leave the ultimate fate of the ideal of color-blindness – understood as complete transcendence of racial identities – up to the inclinations of members of a free society of equals, who may or may not choose to identify along the ancestral lines that race defines today (Anderson, 2010, pp. 177–9). Once a polity becomes dissatisfied by contrasting its condition with some critical-evaluative ideal, the theorist can move in and consider what institutional arrangements might satisfactorily address the newly felt dissatisfactions. As Rousseau shows, and as Hertzberg argues with respect to the color-blind ideal, these arrangements need not consist in attempts to implement the ideal in question directly. In all cases, however, vindication of any ideal must be found in the experiences of those who live according to it – not in *a priori* argument.

Hertzberg suggests that distributive egalitarian ideals might, in their critical-evaluative function, make people feel that income inequality is objectionable. I doubt that many people other than theorists are much moved by *a priori* normative arguments of ideal distributive justice. Rather, income inequality comes to seem a problem for people when its causes and distressing consequences are exposed: when people see that the reason they make so much less than others is that the rules of the economic game have been rigged against them, or that distributive inequality helps explain why political processes have

been captured by the rich, why their employer feels free to abuse them at work, why they are working harder but making less, and why they can't get health insurance.

Knight's account shows that testing ideals in practice is messy. Institutional embodiments of our ideals cannot live up to our highest hopes for them. At best they deliver improvements, even while they suffer from numerous imperfections and disappointments. And, as Knight wisely argues, enduring tensions in our ideals, such as between freedom and equality, are incapable of purely theoretical resolution.

Lawrie Balfour's comments fit into these points. It is possible to hope and strive for ideal forms of national identification that can overcome internal divisions within a polity. The 14th Amendment's definition of citizenship based on territorial birthright was designed to promote this end. But solutions to one problem can fail to solve others. Territorially based birthright citizenship did not work for Asian immigrants. Furthermore, legal institutions do not dictate cultural understandings of national identity, which, as Balfour rightly argues, are often parochial and prejudiced.

Every form of in-group identification generates out-group identities and hence potential injustices. Yet we can hardly do without in-group identification. It is deeply embedded in human psychology, and essential to forging the ties of trust and loyalty essential to successfully functioning cooperative institutions. Liberal democratic politics is inextricably bounded by nation-states, however much liberal theory neglects the sociological conditions of its practice (Calhoun, 2007). Balfour reinforces Knight's point that some tensions of normative ideals are incapable of theoretical resolution, and that even in practice the best we can do is balance competing values, with inevitable losses along the way.

I disagree with two of Balfour's claims. First, my critique of reparations is not that it is backward-looking. On my account of injustice, the causal history of a current state of affairs is highly relevant to judging whether it is unjust (Anderson, 2010, pp. 16–21). My critique of reparations is rather that, in the context of continuing unjust segregation, their positive effects will drain away, like water through a sieve. White society would regard reparations as closing the book on a racial injustice conceived as exclusively inhabiting the past, while washing its hands of its continuing systematic operation (Anderson, 2010, p. 229, n. 19).

Second, Balfour suggests that we scale back our ambitions to a modest ideal of desegregation, in recognition of the disappointing history of Americans in remaking ourselves as an integrated whole, and of the personal dilemma that blacks confront in the prospect of integration. Certainly, the actual attempted embodiment of any ideal always falls short of our best hopes for it. This is no less true for racial integration than it was for abolition. Balfour eloquently articulates additional reasons for worrying about the costs of an integration agenda for blacks. Nevertheless, I am reluctant to scale back. All great ideals of justice require enduring struggle even in the face of repeated disappointment. The struggles for democracy and free labor have taken hundreds of years, and are still continuing. The same is true for racial equality.

Cara Wong highlights empirical challenges to defining and realizing racial integration. Levels of integration vary depending on the scale of analysis, and pose different challenges depending on the setting. It is harder to promote integration on a nationwide

scale, when many states are 90 per cent white or more, than in diverse metropolitan areas. Integration of organizations administered by central authorities, such as the military, workplaces and universities, is easier than integrating neighborhoods and intimate private relations. This is not just an empirical observation; it also has normative weight. The ideal of integration is in tension with principles of freedom of association in private life. Contention over where the boundaries of private life lie has been part of the civil rights struggle, but the law has obvious limitations when it comes to promoting integration of friendship circles and marriages. Some tasks can only be undertaken in civil society – not mandated by law. Yet centrally administered organizations can arrange their operations to facilitate, if not mandate, integration in more intimate settings. While interracial friendships may be less stable than intraracial friendships, some colleges, such as Harvard, have altered their dormitory assignment policies in ways that promote racial integration of college housing. The effects, while not perfect, nevertheless improve upon what would otherwise be a segregated default position.

Wong provides evidence that an adequate causal analysis of dynamics of segregation must consider gaps between subjective conceptions and perceptions of integration and the objective measures provided by demographers. Her suggestion is useful as a warning against mistaken causal models, and because it may generate alternative integration strategies: if whites flee certain areas because they perceive them to be more 'black' than they really are, there may be ways to make the actual demographics of an area more salient in ways that reduce white flight. Nevertheless, all integration strategies must take note of the trade-off Wong notes between comfort (of homophily) and diminished ethnocentrism (brought by integration). In my book, I allow that disadvantaged groups need self-segregated spaces, in part to enable disadvantaged groups to cope with the stresses of integration (Anderson, 2010, pp. 183–4). The ideal of integration, while demanding, is not full-time. As with all ideals that stand in tension to each other, the better options generally call for striking a balance.

I resist two of Wong's suggestions. First, she claims that promoting integration in major metropolitan areas will have no effects in nearly all-white states. Opportunities are most abundant and visible in major metropolitan areas. Routine integration of blacks in more prestigious positions in metro areas can alter racial stereotypes nationwide because metropolitan conditions tend to be more salient at the national level. In addition, there is evidence that living in a jurisdiction led by an elected black politician softens white racial attitudes – at least among Democrats and independents (Hajnal, 2001). Although President Barack Obama was elected on an implicit condition of avoiding racial politics, his election may well have effects beyond whatever policies Obama advances. All of this may seem like weak tea given the gigantic structural obstacles to nationwide integration. As Wong observes, the power of overwhelmingly white, low-population states is constitutionally entrenched in the structure of the Senate. Plainly, integration cannot solve all racial problems. The Constitution has had to be amended at least four times (13th–15th and 24th Amendments, arguably also the 23rd Amendment) to deal with egregious racial inequalities, and innumerable other measures must be taken as well. Nothing in pragmatism guarantees that all problems have complete, feasible solutions.

Second, Wong suggests a trade-off between descriptive representation and influence. Black majority districts guarantee maximum descriptive representation, but at the cost of influence, as such districting delivers the remaining electoral districts disproportionately to overwhelmingly white districts liable to elect candidates that play to white racial prejudice. I reply that descriptive representation is essential for influence. A group of all white officeholders will tend to neglect black interests compared to an integrated group of officeholders due to the former's insularity and ignorance of specifically black concerns. Moreover, the trade-off Wong points to has become far less stark over time as white voting patterns have become less racially polarized. There are vastly more whites willing to vote for a black candidate than in 1965, and there is reason to expect these trends to continue. This is a reason to relax majority-minority districting goals in favor of districts in which blacks exercise substantial electoral influence even though they are in a minority (Pildes, 2002).

I conclude by noting common themes in my critics' comments. All rightly stress the gap between high ideals and messy reality, and the tensions between conflicting normative ideals. I emphasize Knight's point that pragmatist methodology is designed to cope with these gaps and tensions, which cannot be resolved theoretically but are managed in practices that only incompletely realize our aspirations. The promise of pragmatist methodology is that it provides tools for learning from these incomplete realizations, helping us to reshape our ideals in the face of practice, and our practices in light of our ideals, with the aim of improvement – not perfection.

About the Author

Elizabeth Anderson is Arthur F. Thurnau Professor and John Dewey Distinguished University Professor of Philosophy and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She is the author of *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Harvard University Press, 1993), *The Imperative of Integration* (Princeton University Press, 2010) and numerous articles in journals of philosophy, law and economics. She has written extensively on egalitarianism, the interaction of facts and values in social science research, the intersection of democratic theory and social epistemology, affirmative action and racial integration, antidiscrimination law, and the ethical limitations of the market. Elizabeth Anderson, Department of Philosophy, University of Michigan, 2239 Angell Hall, 435 South State Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA; email: *eandersn@umich.edu*

Note

References

Anderson, E. (2010) *The Imperative of Integration*. Princteon, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Calhoun, C. (2007) *Nations Matter: Culture, History and the Cosmopolitan Dream*. London: Routledge.

Cohen, G. A. (2003) 'Facts and Principles', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 31 (3), 211–45.

Dewey, J. (1976 [1915]) 'The Logic of Judgments of Practice', in J. A. Boydston (ed.), *The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, volume 8. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, pp. 14–49.

Dewey, J. and Tufts, J. (1981 [1932]) 'Ethics', in J. A. Boydston (ed.), *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, volume 7. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Gilbert, D. (2006) *Stumbling on Happiness*. New York: A.A. Knopf.

Hajnal, Z. (2001) 'White Residents, Black Incumbents and a Declining Racial Divide', *American Political Science Review*, 95, 603–17.

Pildes, R. (2002) 'Is Voting-rights Law Now at War with Itself? Social Science and Voting Rights in the 2000s', *North Carolina Law Review*, 80 (5), 1517–73.