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Fallibility, Feasibility, and the Social-Guiding Function of Justice

The contemporary methodological debate about justice has centered around a dispute about the value of ideal theory, which is a conception of how a perfectly just society should be arranged. I re-orientate this debate by arguing that the obvious disagreement between many prominent supporters and skeptics of ideal theory obscures the fact that they are united by a shared assumption. Namely, the value of justice exclusively consists of its institution-guiding function. This assumption is false. Justice also performs a social-guiding function, which explains the right actions and attitudes that should be adopted in response to institutional arrangements that are subject to certain epistemic and feasibility constraints. To capture this social-guiding function, a richer normative theory of justice is required; I show how this theory can be developed through the innovation of what I term “nonideal principles of justice.”