Pragmatism and Objectivity

Essays Sparked by the Work of Nicholas Rescher

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Sami Pihlström

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14 Moral Responsibility and the Cognitive Status of Ethical Ideals

John R. Shook

1 Appreciating Ethical Ideals

Nicholas Rescher's *Ethical Idealism* stands with the finest work on ethics produced by the pragmatism movement in philosophy. Indeed, his examination of ethical ideals and the moral life places his book among the small number of twentieth century works on ethics that will remain worthy of close study.

Consistent with his overall philosophy of idealistic pragmatism, Rescher finds that ethical ideals are essential for the proper functioning of morality. Ideals in general are indispensable for intelligent practices, and morality is no exception. Innumerable practices involve projecting what we can be beyond what we are.

> Human aspiration is not restricted by the realities—neither by the realities of the present moment (from which our sense of future possibilities can free us), nor even by our view of realistic future prospects (from which our sense of the ideal possibilities can free us). Our judgment is not bounded by what *is*, nor by what *will* be, nor even by what *can* be. For there is always also our view of what *should* be—what might ideally to be. The vision of our mind's eye extends to circumstances beyond the limits of the possible.
>
> (132)[1]

Rescher speaks of the "limits of the possible"—this is by no means a gesture towards the imagination's overreach where pure fancy lies. In the realm of human action, it really is possible to go beyond the limits of what ideally seems possible. His philosophical anthropology emphasizes that "nature has managed to evolve a creature who aspires to more than nature can offer" (132). Humans are able to intelligently predict much about nature's ways, but our intelligence also evolved to project plans for our ways. Ideals are "a tool for intelligent planning of the conduct of life" (119).

Rescher's ethical idealism has a pragmatically realistic basis. Beyond calculations of what will be, and beyond estimations of what may be, the actual

consequences of acts can be barely imaginable and perhaps even unimaginable to the actor. It is the realist, more than the idealist, who stresses the way that actualities always far outrun foreseeable implications to one's deeds. The ongoing world is not constrained by our own ideas about what is probable. The idealist therefore just as rightly insists that agents pursuing ideals, despite what can be judged possible, do make new realities actual. The idealizing agent is not constrained by the world's indications about what is possible. And that difference makes all the difference in the world.

Ordinary life revolves around what gets deemed practically doable and morally acceptable. Energies should wisely be spent on life's little "musts" from day to day. Yet life has larger prospects. Major endeavors calling for extraordinary effort and sacrifice do not wait upon consultations with mundane musts. Eyes unable to lift their gaze above immediate necessities can't appreciate lofty visions. A petty and small-minded pragmatism is not what Rescher has in mind. To realize the practical need for ideals, one begins by rising above the level of mere practicalities. Organizing and mobilizing resources for a cause requires a guiding idealization to coordinate efforts towards concrete achievements. But realizable achievements are one thing, while that inspiring idealization is another. Rescher tells us in *Ethical Idealism* that

> To adopt an ideal is emphatically not to think its realization to be possible. We do (or should!) recognize from the start that ideals lie beyond the reach of practical attainability. Ideals accordingly do not constitute the concrete objectives of our practical endeavors but rather provide them with some generalized direction.
>
> (120)

Since ideals, in Rescher's sense, serve in the capacity to guide thoughtful action by agents, they have a cognitive role, as well as any emotive/affective role, in human conduct. Furthermore, their cognitive role has less to do with what we think *shall* be, and more to do what we think *should* be. Yet Rescher does not rely on dichotomizing and reifying this distinction. Pragmatically, there need not be a wide "Shall-Should" gap, especially in the sphere of morality.[2] No fallacious leap from 'shall' to 'should' is required. Ideals bridges them, but not to convey one from "shalls" to "shoulds." Ethical ideals (hereafter, simply "ideals") state what *should* guide how a person's conduct *shall* be. The environing conditions calling for action will naturally have their considerable say about the degree of success awaiting that conduct, but those conditions are not grounds for justifying ideals. The basis for ideals lies elsewhere, in the moral sphere.

Exercising moral responsibility at least involves accepting the moral oughts inherent to one's duties. But that commitment is rarely sufficient, due to the complexities of ordinary life. Duties frequently conflict, or at least get in the way of each other, when fulfilling one diminishing the opportunity

to fulfill another. At this level of ordinary moral responsibility, the "oughtness" of one obligation does not evaporate when another obligation is fulfilled instead. Moral regret is unavoidable, and it should be unavoidable even when it quite understandable. Rescher accordingly holds (rightly, in my view) that moral responsibility is not exercised if one outright dismisses an "ought" merely due to limited "cans." Some ethical theories say otherwise, claiming that conflicts among duties are only apparent, typically adopting some version of the principle that "ought implies can."[3] Those theories suggest that on reflection, oughts should be merely "prima facie" or provisional until proven satisfiable, especially if their fulfillment seems less than guaranteed.

Rescher argues that "ought imply can" mustn't prevail in the moral realm of ordinary life. The plausibility of "ought implies can" arises from *retrospective* judgment upon transpired events. We don't assign moral blame for failing to accomplish A if circumstances had turned out to make A impossible anyways. However, *prospective* judgment on future conduct is quite another matter. The widespread adoption of "can't implies no ought" would unravel morality entirely. If people say "I accept a duty to do A" while only meaning "I will do A only if future matters permit A," no one would find obligations or promises believable or dependable, and society would largely cease to use morality. (Morality would devolve into the etiquette of polite promises, like vowing to write every day while traveling away from home.) If moral theory attends to actual moral life, "ought implies can" would only have limited applicability (33–37).

Moral theory should also notice how ordinary morality already handles moral problems (circumstances forbid moral action) and moral dilemmas (another obligation took precedence). We are able to excuse people for unforeseen circumstances or unavoidable duty conflicts, so long as matters were truly unforeseeable or unavoidable. Trying to take due diligence even as we regretfully fail to fulfill many of our obligations is an inevitable aspect of exercising moral responsibility. Rescher adroitly exposes how moral theories affirming the truth of "ought implies can" always refer to concrete cases where thoughtful diligence has already done its work. For example, a duty is supposedly "prima facie" because circumstances are revealed as too unfavorable, or other duties prove to be more important. Evidently, additional moral criteria (rules, principles, and so on) are tacitly applied in these cases to produce just the right judgment about which duty is excusable or not. These are far from intuitive or naïve matters. Moral theory ascends to ethical theorizing here, at the level where criteria about excusing circumstances or ranking obligations are doing their work. Ethical theories can take the liberty of affirming "ought implies can" only because they are taking the sensible precaution of pre-judging which oughts are excusable and which are not. Ethical theories are not unreasonable for appealing to those additional criteria, but those criteria are useful precisely because moral problems and moral dilemmas are very real in the moral sphere.

Moral obligations prevail even if we cannot be sure that we can fulfill them. But there are more and less intelligent ways to anticipate and manage moral problems and conflicts. A morally responsible person must take care to prioritize moral duties in any actual situation, and may have to re-prioritize them in a different situation. How can that kind of moral responsibility, which now can be labeled as ethical responsibility, be properly exercised?

Rescher takes the philosophical position that this ethical responsibility is exercised through the apt cognizance and intelligent application of ideals. For this position, ideals inherently possess a cognitive status, and they can be expressed in propositional form as needed, for playing roles within inferences at the ethical level of reflection upon moral obligation. Moral obligation itself usually doesn't require much self-reflection, but one's day-to-day life encounters situations where moral obligations are somewhat uncertain and confusing. Deliberations involving ideals can clarify genuine moral obligations and draw conclusions about the important responsibilities appropriate to a situation. Ideals will never erode or erase moral "oughts" from view—but ideals can transform unavoidable moral doubts, dilemmas, and disappointments into matters amenable to intelligence. The tragic needn't get us lost in nihilism or mindless despair. Robust moral responsibility and sound ethical judgment, in short, includes the infusion of ideals. There simply is no realistic alternative, if morality is to flourish. As Rescher says, "The moral enterprise is fundamentally committed to the never fully achievable task of making a place for the ideal in the hostile environment of the world's realities" (54).

2 The Proper Function of Ethical Ideals

Both moral philosophy and moral psychology must start from the plain facts of ordinary moral experience. Moral obligation, in so far as an obligation is moral, presents itself as non-contingent and non-conventional to the person feeling under its obligation. If a person is able to regard an obligation as entirely contingent on one's own present state of mind, or current wishes, or one's passing interests and attitudes, then that obligation is not taken to be a moral obligation. If a reader insists that some moral obligations can be appreciated by a person as both moral and as optional and dependent on whether one feels like taking them to be moral obligations, then that reader must set those cases aside for the purposes of this essay.

What readers are more likely thinking about are genuine moral obligations which fail to be acted upon by a person, due to other non-moral matters. But those cases are not about a person able to regard an obligation as moral or not depending on one's wishes, but rather about a person able to regard a moral obligation as something to act upon or not depending on one's motives. The warranted view is that moral obligation per se, as an individual experiences it, is never taken to be completely contingent and conventional.[4] Other readers will dispute this on the grounds that

different groups of people evidently adhere to different moral obligations, so morality does depend on contingent matters (what group one belongs to, for example) and has a conventional status (what each group agrees is moral, for example). This phenomenon points to moral relativism across human cultures, which is an anthropological thesis, but it does not dictate moral contingency, which is a psychological thesis. Each person, no matter what group membership and group history, experiences moral obligation as primarily non-contingent and non-conventional, in so far as one experiences moral obligation at all. This capacity to internalize moral obligation is acquired in young childhood and lasts throughout the lifespan.[5] Anyone who permits that anthropological thesis to dictate how to regard and react to moral obligation has simply degraded their capacity to appreciate moral obligation. Philosophically, there is no need whatsoever to substitute anthropology for psychology. Philosophy can acknowledge both moral relativism and moral obligation simultaneously, comprehending each in its proper sphere of life.

Each moral duty (encompassing moral obligations whether from virtues, rights, and so on), as a duty, makes its demand regardless of any other duties. No duty inherently informs a person how to compare it to rival dutiful demands, or how to ignore or compromise it, or even precisely how to fulfill it in any actual situation. Yet duty doesn't completely confuse or paralyze us. Apparently, more than just duty guides our actual moral conduct from situation to situation. If we are told, "But duties do have features making them more or less relevant, compelling, or overriding," this observation is surely accurate—but what allows us to discriminate and utilize those features? And if we are told, "Compare duties as they present themselves, without bias or sentimentality, to see which deserves priority," this advice is surely wise—but what guides us for forming apt comparisons? Understanding my duty to help a child in need is not the same thing as understanding why dutifully helping that particular child must make me so late for work this morning that I'd get fired. As soon as matters are clarified—Whose child is this? Who else depends on my income? and so on—it is obvious how additional moral criteria are getting applied which were not inherent to the duties themselves. Duties do carry features leaving them amenable to criterial and comparative evaluation, but that additional intellectual work is not done by duties alone. This conclusion cannot be evaded by supposing that our genuine duties are highly specific, such as "Protect one's own child!" Life's strange situations have a way of leaving us all the more uncertain about whether and how to fulfill specific duties. Which of my children do I protect first? . . . and so on. Knowing how to formulate duties so they relevantly guide conduct in actual situations is precisely that extra cognitive information not contained with duties themselves, no matter how specific.

Ethical ideals, from a functionally cognitive viewpoint like Rescher's, should be regarded as regulative norms through which a person can clarify, prioritize, and creatively fulfill moral duties.

> To act intelligently is to act with due reference to the direction in which our own actions shift the course of things. And it is exactly here that ideals come into play. Our ideals guide and consolidate our commitment to virtues and moral excellences.
>
> (131)

Ethical ideals are both "true" to the effort to fulfill morality, and "truly" demanded of any exemplary person able to promote morality. Ordinary morality can perform its social functions for endless generations without much detectible change or appeal to ethical ideals. However, once humanity developed the linguistic and conceptual capacity to formulate and emulate ethical ideals (through the modes of narrative, play acting, art, and so on), their power was undeniable, and no human society has entirely avoided their use. If morality itself will continue to benefit humanity into the indefinite future, ethical ideals will be integrated with the moral life. In that sense, moral philosophy and moral psychology has to recognize ethical idealism as a realistic theory about morality.

Even if this ethical idealism is taken seriously, ethical theory has to consider carefully how intelligence is supposed to both appreciate and apply ethical ideals. While ethical ideals are cognitive, for Rescher, ideals do not automatically possess an a priori status, even if some do aspire to that dubious status. Aspects of morality can have the role of something akin to moral absolutes.[6] Ideals are well designed to play that role, although this "absolute" status must be severely qualified. For moral actors fulfilling morality in their lives, they can and should appeal to specific moral absolutes from time to time when appropriate. There are boundaries to moral permissiveness, for any moral agent, and those boundaries should not be overridable or negotiable in relevant situations encountered by that agent. However, crediting anything, including ideals, with any stronger meaning of 'absolute' should be carefully deliberated. One sense of "absolute" can be ruled out:

> [W]hile ideals *can*—nay *should*—be cultivated, they never deserve total dedication and absolute priority, because this would mean an unacceptable sacrifice of *other* ideals. Their pursuit must be conditioned by recognizing the existence of *a point of no advantage*, where going further would produce unacceptable sacrifices elsewhere, and thus prove counterproductive in the larger scheme of things.
>
> (127)

In another sense of absolute, however, Rescher (2012, Chapter 9) thinks that genuinely moral norms are absolute, because treating a moral norm as valid is to credit it with an objective validity regardless of which people or what authority may do so as well. However, it remains logically correct that a situation in which several people each uphold a moral norm as absolute in not necessarily a situation where they all uphold the same moral

norms. Going further, to say that each moral agent should prioritize some set of high ideals is not the same thing as claiming that there is a unique set of moral absolutes prevailing over all conduct by all moral agents, anywhere and anytime. Some ethical theories presume that speaking of one automatically refers to the other. Rescher is reticent about depicting ideals as absolutely dictatorial over the will or objectively necessary for one's reason, although he expects ideals to be attractively compelling for moral agents who commit to them.

Assigning cognitive status to ideals is a controversial stance, to begin with. Even among philosophical positions permitting ideals to play a cognitive role, denying that ideals need to be static, a priori, or universal is not a popular position. However, serious philosophical work is required to establish that even one single ethical ideal could or should have the cognitive status of a necessary truth for every rational agent. And even more philosophical work would be required to demonstrate that some particular ethical ideal must take exclusive priority over the moral deliberations of every rational agent. In the absence of conclusive philosophical justifications for both of these views, it needn't be unreasonable to think that persons across diverse cultures or eras can be devoted to somewhat different ethical ideals, or that one culture should promulgate many divergent ethical ideals simultaneously.

Rescher does not identify, nor does he expect, any specific conception of an ethical ideal to hold normative priority for all humanity for all time. However, he does assert that all rational agents capable of morality must acknowledge and pursue some ethical ideal(s) having top priority over moral conduct. He is not an absolutist about ethical ideals in every sense; he usually speaks about ideals as a pluralist. His position also accommodates a historicist view of ethical ideals: which specific ideals are the wisest to pursue, and which concrete means shall be used to pursue them, can be discerned only in the course of historical change. People exercising ethical responsibility try to discern the ethical ideals most appropriate for their era, and do their best to judge how to realize those ideals better.

Ethical ideals, for Rescher, arise from the moral life itself, and they serve to elevate the moral life to finer levels. Ethical ideals are not needed most by people lacking moral character and motivation. The common moral life of any society deals directly with laxity and vice through shaming and punishment. Rather, ethical ideals lend guidance to those striving for moral responsibility, improvement and perhaps excellence—in themselves, others, and wider society. Moral obligations crowd us and confuse us, and one's devotion to be true to them all in due measure is the key reason why appreciating ethical ideals makes good sense.

3 Seeking Ethical Ideals

What all ethical ideals have in common is that they are, in a basic sense, "idealizations." They are more abstract than concrete, and they point towards

optimization rather than adequacy. Rescher says, "An ideal is a model or pattern of things too perfect for actual realization in this world" (115). An idealization, generally speaking, begins with a chosen exemplar, whose key features are abstracted for imagining them as perfected.

Among ethical ideals, the simplest kind is the "moral idealization." An important moral obligation is isolated so that its essence can be identified and magnified to an extreme. Suppose we start from the moral obligation to be honest. "Honesty" can be imaginatively taken in its purity and refined to its ultimate extent. The moral idealization of Honesty is now ready for application to the moral sphere of life, when a person adopts Honesty as the right policy, and tries to be completely and openly honest about all matters regardless of circumstance or consequence. That person would be annoying at best, and eventually blunder into incivilities and even immoralities at worst. That is why moral prudence cautions against living strictly by one or a few moral idealizations, no matter how noble they are. Still, living by a set of sensible and coherent moral idealizations, pursued civilly, is a fine way to live the moral life. Their cognitive role is prescriptive, as all moral obligations basically are, but they are "prescriptive moral ideals" that set themselves as priorities as moral confusions or conflicts arise.

Prescriptive moral ideals, while sensible enough, cannot suffice for living the ethically responsible life. Which moral obligations are worthy of idealization? Which prescriptive moral ideals should people commit their lives to? How can excessive devotion to prescriptive ethical ideals be prevented? How do the inevitable conflicts between prescriptive moral ideals be managed? These problems arising in the real world of morality are generated anew in the ideal world of ethics. Rescher is well aware that intelligence does not craft envisioned ideals only to let them heedlessly run rampant to disrupt our lives.

> The stress on ideals must accordingly be tempered by this recognition of the need to harmonize and balance values against one another. In the realm of values too, there must be a Leibnizian *harmonia rerum* where things are adjusted in an order of mutual compossibility.
>
> (128)

Not all ethical ideals are worth the same. Worthier ethical ideals yield some sort of harmonization to values and duties, as the moral realm deserves.

Rescher has the resources to guide ethical theory towards more sophisticated kinds of ethical ideals to answer these questions. Rather than delineating them immediately, I suggest that we first ponder what a moral world would truly look like. Is philosophical ethics burdened with the task of envisioning the morally perfect world in order to measure our immense distance from that vision? Rescher would not place that burden on ethical theorizing—his ethics is idealistic, not unrealistic or pessimistic. Yet the contrast between Rescher's ethical theory and his theory's rivals can be drawn more starkly by allowing philosophers chasing morally perfect worlds to have their say.

Let us suppose that in a "morally perfect" world all moral duties would be knowable, actionable, and fulfilled. A morally perfect world would not look much our actual world we inhabit. In the real world, one can be ignorant or unthinking about one's moral duties, one can know one's moral duties but lack the capacity to fulfill some, and one can perform all of one's actionable moral duties and yet fail to fulfill some other moral duties.

But perhaps our world isn't so imperfect. Let us suppose, just for the sake of argument, that this definition of "moral duty" is adopted:

> D is not a true moral duty for P unless P understands that X is P's moral duty, P knows how to take effective action to fulfill D, and P's fulfillment of D doesn't imply that any other of P's duties are not fulfilled.

In other words, D is P's true moral duty only if P fails to fulfill D because of a lack of will by P. Or, put another way, P cannot be accused of a failure to do moral duty D unless P knowingly and willfully chose to not to fulfill an actionable D. There is no possible world in which a true moral duty goes unfilled except through the lack of will of a person to fulfill that duty. Every possible world is not a world in which all moral duties are fulfilled (a "morally perfect" world). However, all possible worlds are worlds where moral duties could be fulfilled yet go unfulfilled only due to willfully noncompliant persons, who are the subjects of moral blame and correction. These worlds are "ethically perfect" worlds.

A venerable theological ethics from Christianity offers a vision of an ethically perfect world.[7] (1) Each person can know one's moral duties because God's Divine Law is knowable to all (and any ignorance is always due to willful neglect). (2) Each person has the capacities to fulfill a moral duty set by DL because each duty is always actionable (and any ignorance of actionability is due to willful neglect). (3) Each person can know how to simultaneously fulfill all relevant moral duties of DL (and any ignorance about moral performance is always due to willful neglect). In this vision, God takes responsibility for the DL and its determination of moral duties so that 1–3 are always true for each person, while each person takes responsibility for willful compliance.

In general, in an ethically perfect world, the cause of immorality is always ascertainable: a willfully noncompliant person who intentionally prefers immorality. Because the cause of immorality is always ascertainable, the subject of moral correction/retribution is always ascertainable: the willfully immoral person.

Are there any nonreligious visions of an ethically perfect world? Kant and Mill supply versions. Consider this schematic version of Kantian deontology. (1) Each person can know one's moral duties because the categorical imperative (CI) is knowable to all (and any ignorance is always due to willful neglect). (2) Each person has the capacities to fulfill a moral duty because each duty confirmable through the CI is always actionable (and

any ignorance of actionability is due to willful neglect). (3) Each person can know how to simultaneously fulfill all relevant moral duties confirmable through the CI (and any ignorance about moral performance is always due to willful neglect). In this vision, each person's capacity to apply the CI for setting moral duties ensures that 1–3 are always true for each person, while each person takes responsibility for willful compliance.

Next, consider this schematic version of Utilitarianism. (1) Each person can know one's moral duties because the utilitarian method (UM) is knowable to all (and any ignorance is always due to willful neglect). (2) Each person has the capacities to fulfill a moral duty because each duty confirmable through the UM is always actionable (and any ignorance of actionability is due to willful neglect). (3) Each person can know how to simultaneously fulfill all relevant moral duties confirmable through the UM (and any ignorance about moral performance is always due to willful neglect). In this vision, each person's capacity to apply the UM for setting moral duties ensures that 1–3 are always true for each person, while each person takes responsibility for willful compliance. In this vision, each person's capacity to apply the UM for setting moral duties ensures that 1–3 are always true for each person, while each person takes responsibility for willful compliance.

For these three idealized ethical theories, the DL, the CI, and the UM must be evident for ordinary human capacities, no non-actionable duty is confirmable through the DL/CI/UM ('ought' implies 'can'), and any apparent conflict among simultaneous moral duties is always resolvable by better applying, or reapplying, the DL/CI/UM to break seeming ties.

In an ethically perfect world envisioned by these schematic versions of ethical theories, each person can have a single ethical ideal, an ideal fusing ethical motivation with an ethical end. Simplified versions could be expressed as follows:

> Christianity: an ideal of eager compliance with divine law. A person may express this ideal through various emotive tones—love, submission, trust, fidelity, and so on.
>
> Kantian deontology: an ideal of unwavering respect for duty. A person should cultivate various emotive drives—altruism or piety, for example—to promote compliance with this ideal.
>
> Utilitarianism: an ideal of more happiness for everyone. A person can exemplify devotion to this ideal by approving benevolent actions and civic structures for social welfare.

Multiple ideals, and unmotivating ideals, must all be ruled out. Multiple ethical ideals promulgated by an idealized ethical theory raise severe problems. They might contravene each other by prioritizing different duties simultaneously—hence rendering an ethical theory inconclusive, unable to guarantee that moral conflicts are always resolvable. An idealized ethical theory could harbor several ideals, but one must be supreme while the rest

are derivative or supportive, unable to ever overrule that principal ethical ideal. There can be no "motivational gap" on these idealized ethical theories, either. If a person doesn't feel powerfully motivated by an ethical ideal, this person either fails to grasp the ideal (a cognitive defect) or willfully spurns the ideal (a character flaw). So long a person understands an ethical ideal as valid, sufficient internal motivation has already been included with that acceptance. Supplemental motivations can be cultivated, but they do not carry the burden of motivating the ideal. There is no deep psychological or philosophical puzzle to ponder about how a person could affirm an ethical ideal yet need additional prudential reasons to ever heed it. Not heeding an ethical ideal, according to these versions, is easily explained by either mental incapacity or moral depravity.

These three versions are highly idealized and arguably unrealistic even in their most idealized forms, because no amount of philosophizing may permit formulating the DI, CI or UM to guarantee satisfaction of their respective criteria (1–3). Kantians and utilitarians endlessly dispute the merits of their respective approaches, and each school internally divides over specific formulations, none of which may be entirely satisfactory.[8] Theological ethics finds no easy way to satisfy its criteria (1–3) either. Nevertheless, idealized versions of ethical theories from Christianity, Kantian deontology, and Utilitarianism all seek to restrict actionable moral duties to those that could be reasonably understandable and motivational for typical people.

That is why the staple of moral philosophizing involves the design of hypothetical situations where moral decisions are called for under conditions where actors can know much about the outcomes of available alternatives. "Will you choose the act that will surely be sinful to God, or the act that will help your relatives maintain family honor?" "Will you choose the act that will surely kill one person, or the act that will let five people die?" And so on. In an ethically perfect world, such dilemmas are only psychological, not rational or real. They should stimulate moral deliberation without halting it in frustration, since they have definitive singular answers in ethically perfect worlds. Different people reach different verdicts only if they willfully turn away from proper ethical deliberation. That's the true tragedy for such theories—human noncompliance. In an ethically perfect world envisioned by an idealized ethical theory, moral dilemmas aren't real tragedies, since the dilemmas aren't real (there is always a true moral duty, and a false moral duty).

For definitive ethical theories, consequences of choices have to be foreseeable, moral duties can become obvious, and moral tragedy has to somehow be avoidable. A situation in which a person is troubled by what seems to be a moral dilemma is not a counter-example proving that no definitive ethical theory is valid, for each definitive ethical theorist need only say, "If that person heeded my definitive moral theory, that person's moral dilemma would dissolve." However, no definitive ethical theory can point to that situation as positive support, since none of those theories have actually dissolved all

possible dilemmas, and that kind of situation could support all definitive ethical theories equally. The most that can be said is that some definitive moral theories can illuminate some types of moral dilemmas to help resolve them, and various theories have thereby merited respect. There is surely a role for principled ideals of definitive ethical theories in the moral life even if none of them ever demonstrate their exhaustive reach or exclusive validity.[9]

Moral dilemmas, and their tragic aspect, are fit for imperfect ethical worlds, where people must choose their course of conduct despite dilemmas. Just because definitive ethical theories are not dissolving most dilemmas does not mean that there is nothing intelligent left to do about them. Moral dilemmas give instruction in what it is like to try to live a moral life, and an opportunity to intelligently reflect on ways to prevent some future dilemmas. Rescher writes, "a moral dilemma is nothing paradoxical; it is merely an especially difficult case of moral conflict, of the general phenomenon of divergent ethical pushes and pulls" (39). Ethical theorizing needn't halt, stunned and muted, before the presence of tough moral dilemmas. In imperfect ethical worlds there can be multiple ethical theories supply numerous moral methods, each capable of practical guidance, but none yielding definitive verdicts. While constructive, ethical theories in imperfect moral worlds would not involve the sorts of ethical ideals found in definitive ethical theories.

4 Conclusive and Projective Ethical Ideals

What features do ethical ideals of constructive ethical theories display? They would be unlike the features of ethical ideals from definitive ethical theories.

> Definitive ethical theory: Its ethical ideal is singular, supreme, and intrinsically motivational. It possesses undeniable authority, because it carries intrinsic validity and/or a higher authority backs it. This kind of ethical ideal is "conclusive." A typical person who understands it can always methodically determine and fulfill one's true moral duty (unless one rebels against its authority).
>
> Constructive ethical theory: Its ethical ideals are multiple, competing, and highly motivational. An ethical ideal has considerable authority, because it enjoys high plausibility and/or a higher authority supports it. This type of ethical ideal is "projective." A typical person who affirms one (or more) of them can practically postulate how to best prioritize among moral duties (and may fulfill many of them).

The crucial signs differentiating the application of a conclusive ethical ideal from a projective ethical ideal are these:

> A conclusive ethical ideal applies when a person has considerable reliable knowledge about potential outcomes of a decision to act one way or another, including the knowledge that one is in a position to

> decisively take an action having moral import. Given that knowledge and an understanding of the conclusive ethical ideal, the person figures out how to act in accord with the ethical ideal by judging which action fulfills one's true moral duty in that situation. This informed person so acts (unless moral depravity intervenes) and commendably performs the morally correct action.
>
> A projective ethical ideal applies when a person has modest information about some possible outcomes of a decision to act one way or another, and may not fully realize how one is even in a position to do something moral (or immoral). Given one's limited information, an affirmation of some projective ethical ideals, and many other extraneous goals and temptations, the person postulates how to act in accord with relevant ethical ideal(s) by judging which course of action most fulfills the moral duties that seem prioritized by those ideals. This informed person so acts (unless ignorance, moral depravity, or prudential interests intervene) and performs a morally commendable action.

Failing to distinguish whether an ethical ideal is designed to be conclusive or projective can make it difficult to analyze a moral situation. For example, consider this account of a hypothetical situation:

> A person feels a moral duty to achieve a goal that is unachievable. Consulting an ethical ideal, this person confirms this duty to pursue that goal, and resolves to act in accord with that ideal while fully expecting that the goal cannot be satisfied.

What sort of ethical ideal is involved in this situation? We can first notice how this situation may not make much sense. Can this person sincerely regard a goal as unattainable while intentionally pursuing it? If not, we'd appeal to a principle of "intending implies possibly achieving." Can a genuine ethical ideal approve a moral duty to pursue an impossible end? If not, we'd appeal to a principle of "responsibility implies sufficient ability." These two principles—basically, "trying implies envisioning" and "ought implies can"—presuppose a person's knowledge of foreseeable outcomes and actionable means. Hence we can next see how those principles cohere with conclusive ethical ideals, not with constructive ethical ideals. As described, this odd situation is indeed paradoxical. We anticipate a determinate judgment about what one should accomplish, yet nothing seems morally accomplishable or commendable, and this ideal doesn't appear to be an ethical ideal.

To avoid the paradox, either the situation's conditions or the nature of the ethical ideal (or both) must be altered. Consider this version:

> A person feels a moral duty to pursue an end that probably isn't achievable. Consulting an ethical ideal, this person affirms this duty to pursue that end, and resolves to allow that ideal to guide life while ignoring how that end probably won't be achieved.

In this scenario, the ideal is a constructive ethical ideal, able to guide life by commending the fulfilment of a moral duty in the name of a worthy end. Satisfying a constructive ethical ideal does not require actually fulfilling a moral duty that it approves. Satisfaction requires only that one shapes one's life, despite distractions and prudential factors, in a serious attempt at moral fulfillment—a morally commendable effort.

Constructive ethical theories advance projective ethical ideals, ideals shaping long-term and even lifetime projects. The proper function of a projective ethical ideal is to select out and arrange some set of moral duties into a prioritization schema to guide the conduct of living. This kind of ideal, expressed in general form, proposes that "these moral duties should be prioritized in this manner" by the people affirming that ideal. Projective ethical ideals are distinguished from each other by the differing sets of moral duties they deal with, and the prioritization schemes that they recommend.

The ideal of justice, in its form as a projective ethical ideal, could be expressed (among many variants) like this: "The moral duties to respect basic rights should be fulfilled towards all persons equally." The corresponding constructive ethical theory endorsing this ideal would specify and justify the basic rights worthy of unbiased and unwavering protection and offer guidance about effective means of providing such protection. A person committed to this ideal of justice would shape their life by not merely respecting basic rights (that satisfies a simpler ethical ideal to be personally just), but by promoting social processes and civic structures fostering as much justice as possible. A person can live a morally commendable life by faithfully pursuing such broad-scale efforts regardless of whether much advancement of justice is witnessed during one's lifetime.

Conclusive ethical ideals are better fitted to short-term situations of narrow scope. That kind of ideal, expressed in general form, proposes that "this moral duty takes priority in this manner." Delimited scenarios permit much more knowledge about prevailing contexts and expected outcomes, making it far easier to figure out how to effectively fulfill one's given moral duty, one situation at a time. Only projective ethical ideals are useful for contemplating how one should shape and live one's life, and only constructive ethical theories are complex enough to handle long-term issues for larger populations.

5 Classifying Ethical Ideals

Before we conclude with some broader observations about Rescher's position on the importance of ethical ideals, we may summarize the key features to three kinds of ethical ideals discussed in this chapter.

Prescriptive ethical ideals are synthetic a posteriori in their cognitive import.
They are understood through reasoning and validated through learning.

Full appreciation carries a commitment to exemplify it in each applicable situation.
Conclusive ethical ideals are synthetic a priori in their cognitive import.
They are understood through reasoning and validated without learning.
Full appreciation carries a commitment to apply it to every situation.
Projective ethical ideals are analytic a posteriori in their cognitive import.
They are understood by definition and validated through learning.
Full appreciation carries a commitment to infuse it throughout all of one's life.

This chapter has presented an interpretative reconstruction of Rescher's views on ethical ideals, suggesting that they are most compatible with "projective" ethical ideals. Hereafter, mention of ethical ideals refers only to this projective kind, and only I am hereafter responsible for defending their role in ethics. Rescher nowhere describes ethical ideals as "analytic a posteriori," so the burden of justifying that classification falls on my shoulders alone, a burden that must be taken up elsewhere. Here, I can only point to key observations he makes about ideals, concerning how they can be understood and validated.

First, ethical ideals for Rescher make a poor fit with the expectations placed on a priori matters. Ideals are forged in the imagination, but their materials come from ordinary life. Similarly, due to their functions in ordinary life, their validation cannot be independent from experience. Isolated from the living context of everyday life, their significance fades.

> Ideals are crucially important, but without an adequate realization of the realities and complexities of life, they are of little avail. By themselves, ideals are very *incomplete* guides to action.
>
> (127)

> The validation of an ideal is derivative. It does not lie in the (unrealizable) state of affairs that it contemplates—in that inherently unachievable perfection it envisions. Rather, it lies in the influence that it exerts on the lives of its human exponents through the mediation of thought. The justification and power of an ideal inhere in its capacity to energize and motivate human effort toward productive results—in short, in its practical efficacy.
>
> (137)

When infused into the moral life, ethical ideal come alive to do their proper work, and they should be evaluated by their work.

> To appraise ideals in a way that avoids begging the question we must leave the domain of idealization altogether and enter into that of the

> realistically practical. The superiority of one ideal over another must be tested by its practical consequences for human well-being.
>
> (137)

As for the analytic status of ethical ideals, their role in a person's moral life rules out a synthetic status. When one is deeply committed to an ethical ideal, it is fairly well defined in one's mind. An ideal only vaguely conceived is not playing a large role in that person's moral judgments and decisions. (It's not a coincidence that people eager to praise justice without any clear conception of it are probably not directly participating in its concrete realization.) When a person is committed to a clearly defined ethical ideal, that definition is cognitively appreciated as analytic, even if its implementation depends on real-world matters. (The ideal of honesty at least means "do not deceive," but one must find out whether honesty is always the best policy.)

Someone who has woven an ethical ideal into their moral life will not agree that it is a contingent matter whether it has the meaning that it does. Returning to the example of a conception of justice as "respect for basic rights should be fulfilled towards all persons equally," a person committed to that ideal would find unintelligible the notion that justice may alternatively be an unequal respect for basic rights. That person would hardly be impressed by the evident way that other people commit to different meanings to what they call "justice." That people can deeply disagree over what "justice" must mean is further evidence for the analyticity to their conceptions. If "justice" were agreed by all parties to be a synthetic matter, they'd all be amenable to discovering how many rights inequalities truly count as justice. But such amenability among all seekers of justice is difficult to imagine.

The analyticity to the meaning of an ethical ideal, for those applying them, is compatible with their a posteriori validity. In a way, the two support each other. No longer should philosophy feel bound by Kantian dictums concerning analyticity. Pragmatists liberated themselves long ago, and contemporary philosophy after W. V. Quine can also appreciate how "analytic" does not carry every sense of necessity, long-term immutability, or irreplaceability.[10] For pragmatism, an analytic judgment enjoys its validity only so long as those people applying it in their inquiries remain confident in its contributions to achieving hoped-for results. That confidence must be earned, and earned anew into the future.

6 Ethical Ideals and the Moral Life

Life in general, and the moral life in particular, is surely enriched beyond measure by ideals. Even the so-called hopeless ends forever beyond our reach have their place. Rescher ably argues that an attempt to reach an impossible goal may make other goals attainable, and an attempt falling short of an impossible goal can still be an achievement (9–16). All three kinds of ethical

ideals—prescriptive, conclusive, and projective—can enjoy these two sorts of justifications. The life of reason meshes well with the life of morals.

Intelligence appreciates how courageous trials in the face of obstacles can frequently produce more good than not. This pragmatic appreciation for strenuous ideals lends itself to an overall attitude towards life that Rescher finds optimistic. His ethical idealism endorses "attitudinal optimism": "a policy of proceeding (when possible) in the confident hope that a future-oriented optimism of tendency or prospect is indeed warranted" (98). This pragmatic optimism should not be conflated with what might be imagined as an idealistic or even utopian optimism. Rescher lends no support to those urging that life is best when we think our highest ideals are arriving soon. All the same, we often find that great leaps must be taken in faith or not at all, as William James urged in "The Will to Believe" in 1897. In a later essay on "Pragmatism and Religion," James labeled his life stance as "meliorism" to take a position between optimism and pessimism. Our actions taken in accord with ideals can help create a better world, even if the best is beyond our reckoning.[11]

Reason must not lapse into a false optimism that takes advantage of our fond wish to see ideals safely preserved and insulated away from the harsh realities of worldly existence. The purity and stability of ideals is not due to their fixity in some transcendent reality. Ideals are set up high, but we placed them there. Nor should we imagine that our destiny is to join them. They illuminate our lives because we can look up to see them. Rescher says that "ideals serve to orient and structure our actions and give meaning and significance to our endeavors. They are guiding beacons across the landscape of life—distant, even unreachable points of reference that help us find our way" (119–120). Fellow pragmatist John Dewey regarded ideals in a similar manner. His first important work on ethics, *The Study of Ethics* (1894) took a pragmatist position on ideals: "true ideals are the working hypotheses of action . . . Ideals are like the stars; we steer by them, not towards them."[12] In his 1908 book *Ethics* with co-author James Tufts, Dewey reaffirmed how the loftiness of ethical ideals endow our deeds with deep significance, rather than deprive them of worth by comparison.

> An ideal is not some remote all-exhaustive goal, a fixed *summum bonum* with respect to which other things are only means. It is not something to be placed in contrast to the direct, local, and tangible quality of our actual situations, so that by contrast these latter are lightly esteemed as insignificant. On the contrary, an ideal is the conviction that each of these special situations carries with it a final value, a meaning which in itself is unique and inexhaustible.[13]

As James and Dewey agreed, intelligence can make sense of pursuing excellences and perfections for the sake of practical consequences. Many kinds of ideals can pass that reasonable test, especially projective ethical ideals.

Projective ethical ideals can also help us to understand one puzzling aspect of Rescher's ethical theory, his position on "lost causes." Ethical ideals sometimes call for great sacrifice from individuals in the face of great hazards and even assured defeat, but they also call for re-evaluation and reconstruction by successive generations in light of their own experiences. Are ethical ideals recalcitrant to hard experience, or answerable to hard experience? Only projective ethical ideals, and their analytic a posteriori status, allow us to make sense of these seemingly contrary features to ethical ideals. Charles Peirce and Josiah Royce now step forward as Rescher's pragmatist allies.

Peirce defined ethics as "the theory of the control of conduct, and of action in general, so as to conform to an ideal."[14] All reasonable conduct conforms to some ideal or another; ethics seeks the most reasonable ideals. Ideals are no exception from Peirce's pragmatic maxim that "the rational purport of a word or other expression, lies exclusively in its conceivable bearing upon the conduct of life."[15] For Peirce, worthy norms for conduct are never really just the invention or possession of any individual alone. Similarly, the testing of a norm of conduct is never left to any single person, or a single group of people. This is true of science, and Peirce expected it to be true of ethics.[16] Peirce's 1903 Lowell Lectures included a paper on "Ideals of Conduct" in which he says,

> We saw that three kinds of considerations go to support ideals of conduct. They were, first, that certain conduct seems fine in itself. . . . Secondly, we wish our conduct to be consistent. . . . Third, we consider what the general effect would be of thoroughly carrying out our ideals.[17]

Peirce next drew explicit parallels between these three considerations and the reasonable pursuit of inquiry in general, including scientific inquiry. Inquiry is never best undertaken by anyone acting alone. Filtering out error and converging on valid ideas is a communal enterprise. Throughout his writings, he expected the "indefinite community" of inquirers[18] to bear the responsibility for experimentally showing that a hypothesis is "capable of being pursued in an indefinitely prolonged course of action."[19] A moral way of life guided by a certain set of projective ethical ideals is essentially a hypothesis, a communal hypothesis, and any community following those ideals must judge them by their fruits.[20] However, just as a group of scientists may fail to confirm a hypothesis due to a lack of resources and time, a moral community may fail to sustain their way of life due to unfortunate circumstances. If conditions were favorable but ideals proved inadequate, a suffering community may negatively judge those ideals. But what if conditions were unfavorable? Peirce would deny that a scientific hypothesis is forever falsified just because the first scientists to test it managed only to produce inconclusive results. Another scientific community, employing advanced technologies and more resources, may be able to validate that

hypothesis, and equally advantaged scientists anywhere could do the same. Likewise, valid ideals await the thorough testing by any number of communities under favorable conditions.

On this reading of Peirce, an individual's commitment to a projective ethical ideal, or a community's devotion to a set of projective ethical ideals, cannot be finally declared to be unreasonable until full and fair evaluations have been made. When we render a verdict of "unethical" upon a past society, we have the advantage of wider experience: we can either (a) see how that society didn't flourish well under good conditions, or (b) if a society was terminated before its time, we observe how similar societies couldn't flourish when they had good conditions. We can also pass judgment on contemporary societies. For example, we judge tyrannical societies as unethical today because every tyranny in the past eroded or limited human well-being, and recent tyrannies are similarly unsuccessful despite favorable conditions. On the other hand, we should refrain from condemning a society as unethical if its ideals have not yet been fully and fairly tested. There may be something lastingly redeemable about an otherwise failed society, and only future communities would be able to learn whether that is so. Intelligence has every right to search out intriguing ethical hypotheses, especially if there already are examples of people devoted to successful ways of life *and* people devoted to hopeless ways of life. Their exemplary devotion, in both cases, shows that someone placed their confidence and their very lives in the hands of certain ideals.

These reflections allow us to pragmatically appreciate lost causes. A person who sacrifices everything for a failed society has put their faith in a lost cause, but not necessarily in an unreasonable ideal. In fact, marching bravely to the bitter end allows one's life to shine all the brighter from the light of one's ideals, for others in the future to see. Even as I commit my last breath to my ideal, I cannot know that no one will ever learn from my enterprise, even if no one ever thinks about me. That perspective is the ideal of hope, which was Peirce's highest ethical norm for reason.[21] The bare possibility that I may share my beloved ideal with another unknown community, and perhaps an indefinite number of future communities, allows me to participate in that ideal whole community. My living and dying for an ideal is to potentially commune with an extended community most of whom I will never meet, but they could know *me* as I was, and my spirited hope will live in *them*.

Josiah Royce's ethical philosophy centers on communal loyalty to high ideals. His theory of the nature of community and the role of individuality incorporates much from Peirce.[22] Royce agreed that devotion to ideals need not be unreasonable just because one witnesses failure and tragedy. Quite the opposite is the case for Royce, who exalts loyalty to lost causes as the finest exemplar of loyalty to ideals. That loyalty is all the more practical because ideals may survive while societies and entire civilizations go extinct. In his book *The Philosophy of Loyalty* (1908), he writes,

> [L]oyalty to a lost cause may long survive, not merely in the more or less unreal form of memories and sentiments, but in a genuinely practical way. And such loyalty to a lost cause may be something that far transcends the power of any mere habit. New plans, endless conspiracies, fruitful social enterprises, great political organizations,—yes, in the extreme case,—new religions, may grow up upon the basis of such a loyalty to a cause whose worldly fortunes seem lost, but whose vitality may outlast centuries, and may involve much novel growth of opinion, of custom, and of ideals.[23]

It is the potential survival of an ideal in future new communities that bestows the greatest practicality to its significance.

> [W]hen a cause is lost in the visible world, and when, nevertheless, it survives in the hearts of its faithful followers, one sees more clearly than ever that its appeal is no longer to be fully met by any possible present deed. Whatever one can just now do for the cause is thus indeed seen to be inadequate. All the more, in consequence, does this cause demand that its followers should plan and work for the far-off future, for whole ages and aeons of time.[24]

This loyalty to ideals, which is capable of transcending the fate of any particular society, lends ethical nobility to one's devotion to lost causes. All the same, as Royce readily admits, many lost causes should stay lost, and many ideals deserve to be forgotten. But only the indefinite future of all communities can be the best judge upon the prospects for ideals.[25] Their collective judgment will be made with a sense of reverence and gratitude to those who nobly lived in ages past. That reverence is entirely appropriate, for the moral values and ideals of one age grew from those of past ages. Ethical ideals can mutate and develop like any organic thing, for they live in intelligent beings who prospectively apply them in their lives.

In summary, Rescher's view of the cognitive role of ethical ideals, and his philosophy of ethical idealism, is evidently in good company with his fellow pragmatists. They would whole-heartedly agree with the conclusion of *Ethical Idealism*, so let its final words be our final words here:

> A life without ideals need not be a life without purpose, but it will be a life without purposes of the sort in which one can appropriately take reflective satisfaction. The person for whom values matter so little that he has no ideals is condemned to wander through life disoriented, without guiding beacons that give meaning and point to the whole enterprise. Someone who lacks ideals suffers an impoverishment of spirit for which no other resource can adequately compensate.
>
> (144)

Notes

1 All Rescher quotations in this chapter, unless otherwise specified, are from *Ethical Idealism* (Rescher 1987). Any italics in quotations are in the original. Many of his views on values, morality, and ethics are also discussed in Rescher (2012).
2 On the supposed gap between facts and values, see Rescher (2006, Chapter 3).
3 Consult Chrisman (2015).
4 On the matter of answering the question "Why be moral?" see Rescher (1993, Chapter 12).
5 Schmidt, Rakoczy, and Tomasello (2012).
6 See Rescher (1898).
7 Updated for modern times, this theological ethics is explored in Hare (2015).
8 Rescher (2000, Chapter 8) provides his interpretation of the categorical imperative. His core critique of utilitarianism can be read in Rescher (1975, Chapter 5).
9 Rescher's ethical theory does not align well with moral particularism. Moral principles, and other kinds of ethical ideals, have reasonable justifications and undeniable worth on pragmatic grounds, even if they are not necessarily required for conducting ordinary morality in a naïve manner, or sufficient for explaining why every moral duty is truly a moral duty. On moral particularism and its limitations, see McKeever and Ridge (2006).
10 See Rescher (2004, Chapter 9).
11 James (2011, 173–174, 370–373).
12 Dewey (1971, 262).
13 Dewey (1908, 422).
14 Peirce (1931, para 573).
15 Peirce (1934, para 412).
16 Consult Shook (2011).
17 Peirce (1931, para 608).
18 Peirce (1934, para 311).
19 Peirce (1934, para 135).
20 See Liszka (2012).
21 See Shook (2014).
22 See Oppenheim (1993).
23 Royce (1908, 277–278).
24 Royce (1908, 281).
25 Neither Peirce nor James required, as Royce did, the affirmation that an actual all-inclusive community will be fully realized; see Colapietro (2015).

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