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"Ideal Theory" as Ideology

CHARLES W. MILLS

Recent surveys of the development of feminist ethics over the last three decades have emphasized that the exclusive and unitary focus on "care" with which it is still sometimes identified has long been misleading. While paying tribute to the historic significance and continuing influence of Carol Gilligan's and Nel Noddings's pathbreaking work (1982; 1984), commentators such as Samantha Brennan, Marilyn Friedman, and Alison Jaggar point to "the increasing connections between feminist ethics and mainstream moral theory" (Brennan 1999, 859), the "number of diverse methodological strategies" adopted (Friedman 2000, 211), and the "controversy and diversity" rather than "unity" within feminism, marking "the shift from asserting the radical otherness of feminist ethics to seeing feminist philosophers as making a diverse range of contributions to an ongoing [larger] tradition of ethical discussion" (Jaggar 2000, 452–53). Indeed, Samantha Brennan's 1999 *Ethics* survey article suggests that there is no "one" feminist ethic, and that the distinctive features of a feminist approach are simply the perception of the wrongness of women's oppression, and the resulting construction and orientation of theory—based on women's moral experiences—to the goal of understanding and ending that oppression (1999, 860). Obviously, then, this minimalist definition will permit a very broad spectrum of perspectives. In this respect, feminist ethics has interestingly come to converge with feminist political philosophy, which, at least from the "second wave" onward, also encompassed a wide variety of approaches whose common denominator was simply the goal of ending female subordination (Jaggar 1983; Tong 1998).

In this paper, I want to focus on an ethical strategy best and most self-consciously developed in feminist theory in the writings of Onora O'Neill (1987;

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1993), but that can arguably be traced back, at least in implicit and schematic form, to Marxism and classical left theory, and that would certainly be congenial to many people working on race. (I have found it very useful in my own work: Mills 1997; Mills 1998.) I refer to the distinction between idealizing and non-idealizing approaches to ethical theory, and the endorsement of the latter. I will argue that this normative strategy has the virtue of being potentially universalist in its application—able to address many, if not all, of the concerns not only of women, but also of those, men as well as women, subordinated by class, race, and the underdevelopment of the "South"—and reflecting the distinctive experience of the oppressed while avoiding particularism and relativism. Moreover, in certain respects it engages with mainstream ethics on what are nominally its own terms, thereby (at least in theory) making it somewhat harder to ignore and marginalize. Correspondingly, I will argue that the so-called ideal theory more dominant in mainstream ethics is in crucial respects obfuscatory, and can indeed be thought of as in part *ideological*, in the pejorative sense of a set of group ideas that reflect, and contribute to perpetuating, illicit group privilege. As O'Neill argues, and as I agree, the best way of realizing the ideal is through the recognition of the importance of theorizing the *non*ideal.

The Vices of Ideal Theory

Let us begin by differentiating various senses of *ideal*, since the ambiguities and multiple interpretations of the term partially contribute, in my opinion, to whatever superficial plausibility "ideal theory" may have as an approach. To start with, of course, in a trivial sense "ideal" theory applies to moral theory as a whole (at least to normative ethics as against metaethics). Since ethics deals by definition with normative/prescriptive/evaluative issues, as against factual/descriptive issues, and so involves the appeal to values and ideals, it is obviously ideal theory in that generic sense, regardless of any divergence in approaches taken. Call this uncontroversial background normative sense of the ideal, with which we will not be concerned: ideal-as-normative.

Central to our focus, by contrast, is a different sense of *ideal*—ideal as *model*. Call this ideal-as-model. Obviously, this sense is not at all peculiar to ethics, but can be found in other branches of philosophy, and is indeed shared more generally (if not usually in quite the same way) with both natural and social science. Imagine some phenomenon of the natural or social world, *P*. Then an ideal in this sense is a representation of *P*. One kind of representation purports to be descriptive of *P*'s crucial aspects (its essential nature) and how it actually works (its basic dynamic). Call this descriptive modeling sense: ideal-as-descriptive-model. Since a model is not coincident with what it is modeling, of course, an ideal-as-descriptive-model necessarily has to abstract away from certain features of *P*. So one will make simplifying assumptions, based on what one takes the

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most important features of *P* to be, and include certain features while omitting others: this will produce a schematized picture of the actual workings and actual nature of *P*. But for certain *P* (not all), it will also be possible to produce an idealized model, an exemplar, of what an ideal *P* should be like. Call this idealized model ideal-as-idealized-model. Unless the *P* in question is itself an ideal *P*, then obviously a gap will exist between it and the ideal, and correspondingly between ideal-as-descriptive-model (an ideal—in the sense of accurate—model of how *P* actually works) and ideal-as-idealized-model (an ideal—in the sense of an exemplar—model of how *P* should work). And obviously the "should" here will in general not necessarily be a moral "should," but may involve norms of a technical functionalist kind (an ideal vacuum cleaner, an ideal concentration camp, an ideal digestive system, and so on) or just limiting assumptions convenient for the purposes of mathematization and calculation (an ideal gas, a perfect vacuum, a frictionless plane, a resistance-free conductor).

Now in trying to understand the workings of an actual *P*, how useful will it be to start from an ideal-as-idealized-model of *P*? Obviously, this question cannot be answered a priori: it's going to depend on how closely the actual *P* in question approximates the behavior of an ideal *P*. A very smooth, Teflon-coated plane suspended in a vacuum may come close enough that one can regard its behavior as approaching that of an ideal frictionless plane: ideal-as-descriptive-model here will approximate, if falling a bit short of, ideal-as-idealized-model. So one can think of ideal-as-idealized-model as an extrapolation, in the limit, of the behavior of *P* (here the plane), or from the other direction, regard ideal-as-descriptive-model as just being slightly deviant from this ideal. But if the plane is covered not with Teflon, but Velcro, or is pitted, cracked, and abraded in various ways, then obviously this would be absurd. Ideal-as-descriptive-model, the model of the actual workings of the plane, will be quite different from ideal-as-idealized-model, and one will need to start with an actual investigation of the plane's properties; one cannot just conceptualize them in terms of a minor deviation from the ideal, ideal-as-idealized-model. And if one wants to change the actual *P* so it conforms more closely in its behavior to the ideal *P*, one will need to work and theorize not merely with the ideal, ideal-as-idealized-model, but with the nonideal, ideal-as-descriptive-model, so as to identify and understand the peculiar features that explain *P*'s dynamic and prevent it from attaining ideality.

Let us now turn (doubtless to the relief of readers) from these mechanical comparisons to what we're really interested in: the application of these distinctions to human interaction and moral theory. Since we're dealing with moral agents and not gases, planes, or vacuum cleaners, the ideal in the ideal-as-idealized-model sense has here, of course, a crucial moral dimension along with the factual one. Factually, idealization involves the attribution to the agents (as conceived of in the theory) of human capacities significantly deviant from

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the norm; for example, their degrees of rationality, self-knowledge, ability to make interpersonal cardinal utility comparisons, and the like (O'Neill 1987, 56). Morally, idealization involves the modeling of what people should be like (character), how they should treat each other (right and good actions), and how society should be structured in its basic institutions (justice). Different theorists will, of course, diverge on what these ideals are, and correspondingly, on their views of what ideal character, the relation between the right and the good, and the nature of a just society consist in. But they will have in common *an* ideal of some sort.

Now what distinguishes ideal theory is not merely the *use* of ideals, since obviously nonideal theory can and will use ideals also (certainly it will appeal to the *moral* ideals, if it may be more dubious about the value of invoking idealized human capacities). What distinguishes ideal theory is the reliance on idealization to the exclusion, or at least marginalization, of the actual. As O'Neill emphasizes, this is *not* a necessary corollary of the operation of abstraction itself, since one can have abstractions of the ideal-as-descriptive-model type that abstract without idealizing. But ideal theory either tacitly represents the actual as a simple deviation from the ideal, not worth theorizing in its own right, or claims that starting from the ideal is at least the best way of realizing it. Ideal theory as an approach will then utilize as its basic apparatus some or all of the following concepts and assumptions (there is necessarily a certain overlap in the list, since they all intersect with one another):

• An idealized social ontology. Moral theory deals with the normative, but it cannot avoid *some* characterization of the human beings who make up the society, and whose interactions with one another are its subject. So some overt or tacit social ontology has to be presupposed. An idealized social ontology of the modern type (as against, say, a Platonic or Aristotelian type) will typically assume the abstract and undifferentiated equal atomic individuals of classical liberalism. Thus it will abstract *away* from relations of structural domination, exploitation, coercion, and oppression, which in reality, of course, will profoundly shape the ontology of those same individuals, locating them in superior and inferior positions in social hierarchies of various kinds.

• Idealized capacities. The human agents as visualized in the theory will also often have completely unrealistic capacities attributed to them—unrealistic even for the privileged minority, let alone those subordinated in different ways, who would not have had an equal opportunity for their natural capacities to develop, and who would in fact typically be disabled in crucial respects.

• Silence on oppression. Almost by definition, it follows from the focus of ideal theory that little or nothing will be said on actual historic oppression and its legacy in the present, or current ongoing oppression, though these may be gestured at in a vague or promissory way (as something to be dealt with later). Correspondingly, the ways in which systematic oppression is likely to shape the

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basic social institutions (as well as the humans in those institutions) will not be part of the theory's concern, and this will manifest itself in the absence of ideal-as-descriptive-model concepts that would provide the necessary macro- and micro-mapping of that oppression, and that are requisite for understanding its reproductive dynamic.

• Ideal social institutions. Fundamental social institutions such as the family, the economic structure, the legal system, will therefore be conceptualized in ideal-as-idealized-model terms, with little or no sense of how their actual workings may systematically disadvantage women, the poor, and racial minorities.

• An idealized cognitive sphere. Separate from, and in addition to, the idealization of human capacities, what could be termed an idealized cognitive sphere will also be presupposed. In other words, as a corollary of the general ignoring of oppression, the consequences *of* oppression for the social cognition of these agents, both the advantaged and the disadvantaged, will typically not be recognized, let alone theorized. A general social transparency will be presumed, with cognitive obstacles minimized as limited to biases of self-interest or the intrinsic difficulties of understanding the world, and little or no attention paid to the distinctive role of hegemonic ideologies and group-specific experience in distorting our perceptions and conceptions of the social order.

• Strict compliance. Finally, some theorists, such as, famously, John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*, also endorse "ideal theory" in the sense of "strict compliance as opposed to partial compliance theory": the examination of "the principles of justice that would regulate a well-ordered society. Everyone is presumed to act justly and to do his part in upholding just institutions." Rawls concedes that "the problems of partial compliance theory are the pressing and urgent matters. These are the things that we are faced with in everyday life." But, he argues, "The reason for beginning with ideal theory is that it provides, I believe, the only basis for the systematic grasp of these more pressing problems" (Rawls 1999, 8). Since Rawls's text is widely credited with reviving postwar Anglo-American normative political theory, and of being the most important book of the twentieth century in that tradition, this methodological decision can plausibly be argued to have been a significant factor in influencing the whole subsequent direction of the field, though I would also claim that his decision and its general endorsement also reflect deeper structural biases in the profession.

Now look at this list, and try to see it with the eyes of somebody coming to formal academic ethical theory and political philosophy for the first time. Forget, in other words, all the articles and monographs and introductory texts you have read over the years that may have socialized you into thinking that this is how normative theory should be done. Perform an operation of Brechtian defamiliarization, estrangement, on your cognition. Wouldn't your spontaneous reaction be: *How in God's name could anybody think that this is the appropriate way to do ethics?*

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I suggest that this spontaneous reaction, far from being philosophically naïve or jejune, is in fact the correct one. If we start from what is presumably the uncontroversial premise that the ultimate point of ethics is to guide our actions and make ourselves better people and the world a better place, then the framework above will not only be unhelpful, but will in certain respects be deeply *antithetical* to the proper goal of theoretical ethics as an enterprise. In modeling humans, human capacities, human interaction, human institutions, and human society on ideal-as-idealized-models, in never exploring how deeply different this is from ideal-as-descriptive-models, we are abstracting away from realities crucial to our comprehension of the actual workings of injustice in human interactions and social institutions, and thereby guaranteeing that the ideal-as-idealized-model will never be achieved.

It is no accident that historically subordinated groups have always been deeply skeptical of ideal theory, generally see its glittering ideals as remote and unhelpful, and are attracted to nonideal theory, or what significantly overlaps it, "naturalized" theory. In the same essay cited above, Jaggar identifies a "unity of feminist ethics in at least one dimension," a naturalism "characteristic, though not definitive, of it" (Jaggar 2000, 453). Marxism no longer has the appeal it once did as a theory of oppression, but it was famous for emphasizing, as in *The German Ideology*, the importance of descending from the idealizing abstractions of the Young Hegelians to a focus on "real, active men," not "men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived," but "as they *actually* are," in (class) relations of domination (Marx and Engels 1976, 35–36). And certainly black Americans, and others of the racially oppressed, have always operated on the assumption that the natural and most illuminating starting point is the *actual* conditions of nonwhites, and the discrepancy between them and the vaunted American ideals. Thus Frederick Douglass's classic 1852 speech, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth [of] July?" points out the obvious, that the inspiring principles of freedom and independence associated with the celebration are not equally extended to black slaves: "I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. . . . The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. . . . This Fourth July is *yours*, not *mine*. *You* may rejoice, *I* must mourn" (1996, 116, emphasis in original). So given this convergence in gender, class, and race theory on the need to make theoretically central the existence and functioning of the actual *non*-ideal structures that obstruct the realization of the ideal, what defensible arguments for abstracting *away* from these realities could there be?

First, as a preliminary, we need to quickly clear away some of the ambiguities and verbal confusions that might mistakenly lead one to support ideal theory. All moral theory is ideal in the ideal-as-normative sense, but of course that's not the sense at stake here, so that can't be why we need ideal theory. Nor is

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ideal theory just a model, which every theory requires, since we have already distinguished models in the ideal-as-descriptive-model and models in the ideal-as-idealized-model sense. Nor can it be claimed that, whatever its faults, ideal theory is the only way to do ethics, or the only theory-supported/generalist way to do ethics (as against unsatisfactory particularist alternatives), since there *is* an alternative that is also generalist in the form of nonideal theory. Nor does the simple appeal *to* an ideal (say, the picture of an ideally just society) necessarily make the theory ideal theory, since nonideal theory can and does appeal to an ideal also.

So these are either obviously bad arguments or simple confusions. What are the real defenses of ideal theory? A first possible argument might be the simple denial that moral theory should have *any* concern with making realistic assumptions about human beings, their capacities, and their behavior. Ethics is concerned with the ideal, so it doesn't have to worry about the actual. But even for mainstream ethics this wouldn't work, since, of course, *ought* is supposed to imply *can*: the ideal has to be achievable by humans. Nor could it seriously be claimed that moral theory is concerned only with mapping beautiful ideals, not their actual implementation. If any ethicist actually said this, it would be an astonishing abdication of the classic goal of ethics, and its link with practical reason. The normative here would then be weirdly detached from the prescriptive: this is the good and the right—but we are not concerned with their actual realization. Even for Plato, a classic example in at least one sense of an ideal theorist, this was not the case: the Form of the Good was supposed to motivate us, and help philosophers transform society. Nor could anyone seriously say that ideal theory is a good way to approach ethics because as a matter of *fact* (not as a conceptual necessity following from what "model" or "ideal" means), the normative here *has* come close to converging with the descriptive: ideal-as-descriptive-model *has* approximated to ideal-as-idealized-model. Obviously, the dreadful and dismaying course of human history has not *remotely* been a record of close-to-ideal behavior, but rather of behavior that has usually been quite the polar opposite of the ideal, with oppression and inequitable treatment of the majority of humanity (whether on grounds of gender, or nationality, or class, or religion, or race) being the norm.

So the argument cannot be that as a matter of definitional truth, or factual irrelevance, or factual convergence, ideal theory is required. The argument has to be, as in the quote from Rawls above, that this is the *best* way of doing normative theory, better than all the other contenders. But why on earth should anyone think this? Why should anyone think that abstaining from theorizing about oppression and its consequences is the best way to bring about an end to oppression? Isn't this, on the face of it, just completely implausible?

I suggest that since in fact there are no good reasons for making this assumption, and many good reasons against it, we have to look elsewhere to understand

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the dominance within philosophy of ideal theory. Ideal theory, I would contend, is really an *ideology*, a distortional complex of ideas, values, norms, and beliefs that reflects the nonrepresentative interests and experiences of a small minority of the national population—middle-to-upper-class white males—who are hugely *over-represented* in the professional philosophical population. Once this is understood, it becomes transparent why such a patently deficient, clearly counterfactual and counterproductive approach to issues of right and wrong, justice and injustice, has been so dominant. As theorists of ideology emphasize, this should not be thought of in terms of conscious conspiratorial manipulation, but rather in terms of social privilege and resulting differential experience, a nonrepresentative phenomenological life-world (mis)taken for *the* world, reinforcement (in this case) by professional norms of what counts as respectable and high-prestige philosophy, and—if not to be inflated into the sole variable, certainly never to be neglected in the sociology of belief—the absence of any countervailing group interest that would motivate dissatisfaction with dominant paradigms and a resulting search for better alternatives. Can it possibly serve the interests of *women* to ignore female subordination, represent the family as ideal, and pretend that women have been treated as equal persons? Obviously not. 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 against just terminologically, includes them? Obviously not. Can it possibly serve the interests of the *poor and the working class* to ignore the ways in which an increasingly inequitable class society imposes economic constraints that limit their nominal freedoms, and undermine their formal equality before the law? Obviously not.[1] If we ask the simple, classic question of *cui bono*? then it is obvious that ideal theory can only serve the interests of the privileged,[2] who, in addition—precisely because of that privilege (as bourgeois white males)—have an experience that comes closest to that ideal, and so experience the least cognitive dissonance between it and reality, ideal-as-idealized-model and ideal-as-descriptive-model. So, as generally emphasized in the analysis of hegemonic ideologies, it is not merely the orientation by this group's interests that serves to buttress ideal theory, but their (doubly) peculiar experience of reality.

The Virtues of Nonideal Theory

Let me now go through some of the many ways in which I claim that nonideal theory is clearly superior to ideal theory. As indicated, I will try to make the case that its applicability extends, and in fact that it has historically been applied (even if not always consciously under that banner), to issues of class and race also.

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Generalism vs. Particularism. First, consider a kind of framing meta-issue, which is related to, though not coincident with, these matters. For at least a decade, one of the most important debates in ethical theory has been that between generalists and particularists (for example, see Hooker and Little 2000). A quick summary of their respective positions is difficult, because definitions tend to be contested by those in the same camp as well as those in the other camp. But roughly, generalists think that nontrivial general moral principles exist while particularists deny this. Within mainstream ethics, the particularism in question is usually located at the individual level, so that the debate in this form does not map neatly onto feminist debates. But one way of conceptualizing the challenge from those feminists and people of color hostile to "malestream"/ "white" principles is as an affirmation of a *group-based* particularism. (Think of the famous T-shirt slogan worn by some African-Americans: "It's a black thang—you wouldn't understand.") The distinctive experience of women, or of nonwhites, it will be argued, requires the rejection of the bogus generality, the spurious universalism, of hegemonic principles that have proven so clearly inadequate to addressing the situation of the subordinated. And since ideal theory classically lays claim to objectivity, it may be felt that rejection requires the abandonment of pretensions (likewise seen as bogus) to objectivity also.

But though particularism (in this group-based form) responds to a real problem, its solution arguably results from a faulty diagnosis. Dominant abstractions may indeed be remote, dominant principles may indeed be unhelpful, dominant categories may indeed be alienating; but this lack of fit between generality and one's experience (the maleness and whiteness of the supposedly general, genderless, and colorless view from nowhere) arguably arises not from abstraction and generality per se, but an abstraction and generality that *abstract away* from gender and race. The problem is that they are *deficient* abstractions of the ideal-as-idealized-model kind, not that they are abstractions *tout court*. What one wants are abstractions of the ideal-as-descriptive-model kind that capture the essentials of the situation of women and nonwhites, not abstract away from them. Global concepts like *patriarchy* and *white supremacy* arguably fulfill this role, as Marxism's *class society/capitalism* did (however inadequately for nonclass oppressions) for earlier generations. These terms are abstractions that *do* reflect the specificities of group experience, thereby potentially generating categories and principles that illuminate rather than obfuscate the reality of different kinds of subordination.

Moreover, particularism holds many dangers, whether individual or group-based. Theory necessarily requires abstraction, and to concede this realm to the adversary is an odd way of challenging him. Rejecting abstraction and generalism deprives one of the apparatus necessary for making general theoretical statements of one's own, and indeed of critiquing those same hegemonic

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misleading abstractions. One is ghettoizing oneself in a self-circumscribed intellectual space, rather than challenging the broader mapping of that space. One also risks the dangers of relativism, which makes it difficult to affirm that, objectively, women and people of color are indeed oppressed—not merely that they believe they're oppressed. In addition, the mainstream apparatus (for example, of justice and rights) then becomes a necessarily alien tool in the oppressor's arsenal, rather than a weapon to be used and turned against him. One can no longer demand gender or racial justice. Finally, another obvious problem with particularism is that since there is more than one oppressed group, it will sometimes be necessary to adjudicate rival ethical claims among those subordinated by different systems, for example race and gender, or gender and North/South domination. The obvious example here is the situation of Southern women, and the claim that their subordination is not subordination at all, but a cultural tradition whose condemnation by the North is imperialist and racist. For example, see the exchange between Susan Moller Okin and Jane Flax in Okin (1994); Flax (1995); and Okin (1995). In the absence of some universalist, intertranslatable, not incommensurable measure of rights or well being, how can such clashes be resolved?

Nonidealized Descriptive Mapping Concepts

Moral cognition is no more just a matter of naïve direct perception than empirical cognition is. Unless, as moral intuitionists in the early twentieth century did, one believes in a distinct "moral sense" separate from the more familiar nonmoral five senses, then it must be conceded that concepts are necessary to apprehend things, both in the empirical and moral realm. After all, it was Kant, not some anti-Establishment figure, who said that perceptions without concepts are blind. But once one recognizes (unlike Kant) the huge range of possible conceptual systems, then—unless one is a relativist (and I have already suggested that objectivism should be the ideal)—concern about conceptual adequacy becomes crucial. This will be true even for mainstream theory, where the primary sources of possible distortion will be attributed to simple human failings in our cognitive apparatus. But for the radical oppositional theory of class, race, and gender, of course, the case for such alertness goes through *a fortiori*. Instead of the idealized cognitive sphere that ideal theory tends to presuppose, Marxists, feminists, and critical race theorists all have, as part of their theoretical analysis, elaborate *meta*theories (theories about theories) mapping how systems of domination negatively affect the ideational. (This is a direct consequence, of course, of nonideal theory's recognition of the centrality of oppression, and its insight that in understanding the social dynamic, a theorization of the ideal-as-descriptive-model type is required—it is not just a minor "deviation" from ideal-as-idealized-model that is involved.)

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The crucial common claim—whether couched in terms of ideology and fetishism, or androcentrism, or white normativity—is that all theorizing, both moral and nonmoral, takes place in an intellectual realm dominated by concepts, assumptions, norms, values, and framing perspectives that reflect the experience and group interests of the privileged group (whether the bourgeoisie, or men, or whites). So a simple empiricism will not work as a cognitive strategy; one has to be self-conscious about the concepts that "spontaneously" occur to one, since many of these concepts will not arise naturally but as the result of social structures and hegemonic ideational patterns. In particular, it will often be the case that dominant concepts will obscure certain crucial realities, blocking them from sight, or naturalizing them, while on the other hand, concepts necessary for accurately mapping these realities will be absent. Whether in terms of concepts of the self, or of humans in general, or in the cartography of the social, it will be necessary to scrutinize the dominant conceptual tools and the way the boundaries are drawn.

This is, of course, the burden of standpoint theory—that certain realities tend to be more visible from the perspective of the subordinated than the privileged (Harding 2003). The thesis can be put in a strong and implausible form, but weaker versions do have considerable plausibility, as illustrated by the simple fact that for the most part the crucial conceptual innovation necessary to map nonideal realities has *not* come from the dominant group. In its ignoring of oppression, ideal theory also ignores the consequences of oppression. If societies are not oppressive, or if in modeling them we can abstract away from oppression and assume moral cognizers of roughly equal skill, then the paradigmatic moral agent can be featureless. No theory is required about the particular group-based obstacles that may block the vision of a particular group. By contrast, nonideal theory recognizes that people *will* typically be cognitively affected by their social location, so that on both the macro and the more local level, the descriptive concepts arrived at may be misleading.

Think of the original challenge Marxist models of *capitalism* posed to liberalism's social ontology: the claim that to focus on relations of apparently equal exchange, free and fair, among equal individuals was illusory, since at the level of the relations of production, the real ontology of worker and capitalist manifested a deep structure of constraint that limited proletarian freedom. Think of the innovation of using *patriarchy* to force people to recognize, and condemn as political and oppressive, rather than natural, apolitical, and unproblematic, male domination of women. Think of the recent resurrection of the concept of *white supremacy* to map the reality of a white domination that has continued in more subtle forms past the ending of de jure segregation. These are all global, high-level concepts, undeniable abstractions. But they map accurately (at least arguably) crucial realities that differentiate the statuses of the human beings within the systems they describe; so while they *abstract*, they do not *idealize*.

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Or consider conceptual innovation at the more local level: the challenge to the traditional way the public/private distinction was drawn, the concept of sexual harassment. In the first case, a seemingly neutral and innocuous conceptual divide turned out, once it was viewed from the perspective of gender subordination, as contributing to the reproduction of the gender system by its relegation of "women's issues" to a seemingly apolitical and naturalized space. In the case of sexual harassment, a familiar reality—a staple of cartoons in men's magazines for years (bosses chasing secretaries around the desk and so on)—was reconceptualized as negative (not something funny, but something morally wrong) and a contributor to making the workplace hostile for women. These realizations, these recognitions, did not spontaneously crystallize out of nowhere; they required conceptual labor, a different map of social reality, a valorization of the distinctive experience of women. As a result of having these concepts as visual aids, we can now see better: our perceptions are no longer blinded to realities to which we were previously obtuse. In some sense, an ideal observer should have been able to see them—yet they did not, as shown by the nonappearance of these realities in male-dominated philosophical literature.

Normative Concepts

Ideal theory might at least seem to be unproblematic in the realm of the ideals themselves: normative concepts. Here if nowhere else, it might be felt, idealization is completely legitimate. But even here the adequacy of ideal theory can be challenged on at least three dimensions: the legitimacy of the normative concept in the first place; the particular way that the normative concept is applied, or operationalized; and the absence of other normative concepts.

Consider *purity* as an ideal. In abstraction, it sounds innocent enough—surely purity is good, as against impurity. Who could object to that? But consider its historic use in connection with race. For many decades in the United States and elsewhere, *racial purity* was an ideal, and part of the point of antimiscegenation law was to preserve the "purity" of the white race. Since blackness was defined by the "one-drop rule"—any black ancestry makes you black (Davis 1991)—the idea of black purity would have been a contradiction in terms. So there was a fundamental asymmetry in the way "purity" was applied, and in practice both the law and social custom was primarily on the alert for black male/white female "miscegenation," not white male/black female "miscegenation," which was widely winked at. Apart from what we would now, in a more enlightened age, see as its fundamental incoherence—that since races have no biological existence, they are not the kinds of entities that can be either pure or impure—the ideal of purity served to buttress white supremacy. So here a normative concept once accepted by millions was actually totally illegitimate (Alcoff 1995). (Similarly, think of the historic role of "purity" as an invidious

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standard for evaluating female sexuality, and the corresponding entrenchment of the double standard.)

Or consider a (today) far more respectable ideal, that of *autonomy*. This notion has been central to ethical theory for hundreds of years, and is, of course, famously most developed in Kant's writings. But recent work in feminist theory has raised questions as to whether it is an attractive ideal at all, or just a reflection of male privilege. Human beings are dependent upon others for a long time before they can become adult, and if they live to old age, are likely to be dependent upon others for many of their latter years. But traditionally, this work has been done by women, and so it has been invisible or taken for granted, not theorized. Some feminist ethicists have argued for the simple abandonment of autonomy as an attractive value, but others have suggested that it can be redeemed once it is reconceptualized to take account of this necessarily interrelational aspect (MacKenzie and Stoljar, 2000). So the point is that idealization here obfuscates the reality of care giving that makes any achievement of autonomy possible in the first place, and only through nonideal theory are we sensitized to the need to balance this value against other values, and rethink it. Somewhat similarly, think of the traditional left critique of a liberal concept of freedom that focuses simply on the absence of juridical barriers, and ignores the many ways in which economic constraints can make working-class liberties largely nominal rather than substantive.

Finally, it may be that the nonideal perspective of the socially subordinated is necessary to generate certain critical evaluative concepts in the first place, since the experience of social reality of the privileged provides no phenomenological basis for them: Marxist concepts of class alienation and labor exploitation; feminist concepts of sexual alienation and affective exploitation; critical race theory concepts of whiteness as oppressive and "colorblindness" as actually whiteness in disguise. Insofar as concepts crystallize in part from experience, rather than being a priori, and insofar as capturing the perspective of subordination requires advertence to its reality, an ideal theory that ignores these realities will necessarily be handicapped in principle.

Nonideal Theory as Already Contained in Ideal Theory?

Finally, consider the following objection. Suppose it is claimed that the foregoing accusations are unfair because, in the end, nonideal theory and its various prescriptions are somehow already "contained" within ideal theory. So there is no need for a separate enterprise of this kind—or if there is, it is just a matter of *applying* principles, not of *theory* (applied ethics rather than ethical theory)—since the appropriate recommendations can, with the suitable assumptions, all be derived from ideal theory. After all, if the ideal liberal individual is supposed to be entitled to certain basic rights and freedoms, then why can't this

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abstract individual subsume the workers, women, and nonwhites who are also persons—even if, admittedly, they were not historically recognized as such?

I think the problem here is a failure to appreciate the nature and magnitude of the obstacles to the cognitive rethinking required, and the mistaken move—especially easy for analytic philosophers, used to the effortless manipulation of variables, the shifting about of *p*'s and *q*'s, in the frictionless plane (redux!) of symbolic logic—from the ease of logical implication to the actual inferential patterns of human cognizers who have been socialized by these systems of domination. (This failure is itself, reflexively, a manifestation of the idealism of ideal theory.) To begin with the obvious empirical objection: if it were as easy as all that, just a matter of *modus ponens* or some other simple logical rule, then why was it so hard to do? If it were obvious that women were equal moral persons, meant to be fully included in the variable "men," then why was it not obvious to virtually every male political philosopher and ethicist up to a few decades ago? Why has liberalism, supposedly committed to normative equality and a foundational opposition to ascriptive hierarchy, found it so easy to exclude women and nonwhites from its egalitarian promise? The actual working of human cognitive processes, as manifested in the sexism and sometimes racism of such leading figures in the canon as Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Hobbes, Hume, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and the rest, itself constitutes the simplest illustration of the mistakenness of such an analysis.

Moreover, it is another familiar criticism from feminism that the inclusion of women cannot be a merely terminological gender neutrality, just adding and stirring, but requires a rethinking of what, say, equal rights and freedoms will require in the context of female subordination. Susan Moller Okin argued years ago that once one examines the real-life family, it becomes obvious that women's exit options from marriage are far more restricted than men's, because of the handicaps of sacrificing one's career to childrearing (Okin 1989). So a commitment to fairness, equal rights, and justice in the family arguably requires special measures to compensate for these burdens, and reform social structures accordingly. But such measures cannot be spun out, a priori, from the concept of equality as such (and certainly they cannot be generated on the basis of assuming the *ideal* family, as Rawls did in *A Theory of Justice*). Rather, they require empirical input and an awareness of how the real-life, *non*ideal family actually works. But insofar as such input is crucial and guides theory (which is why it's incorrect to see this as just "applied" ethics), *the theory ceases to be ideal.* So either ideal theory includes the previously excluded in a purely nominal way, which would be a purely formal rather than substantive inclusion, or—to the extent that it does make the dynamic of oppression central and theory-guiding—it is doing nonideal theory without calling it such. (Compare the conservative appeal to a superficially fair "color-blindness" in the treatment of people of color, whose practical effect is to guarantee a blindness to the distinctive measures required to redress and overcome the legacy of white supremacy.)

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Similarly, it cannot be claimed that from the *possibility* of the extension of ideal theory to previously excluded populations that this shows the ideal theory is *really* not exclusionary. The extension (at least in a society where these populations are subordinated, so that hegemonic concepts and argumentative patterns have accommodated to their subordination) is precisely what requires the work, and marks the transition *out of* the realm of the ideal. If Kant says all persons should be treated with respect, but arguably defines his terms so that being male is a prerequisite for full personhood (Schröder 1997), it is not a minor change to remove this restriction. A Kantian polity where women can only be passive citizens and a polity where this stipulation is removed are not the same: the latter is not "contained" in the former as a potential waiting to be realized. When Okin uses the original position, a Rawlsian construct, to take the nonideal family into account from behind the veil, the result is not (somehow) Rawls's "real" view—certainly not the Rawls who did not even mention sex as something you do not know behind the veil! What is doing the work are the *real* "general facts about human society"—the *non*ideal facts about gender subordination that Rawls apparently did not know.

Nor, as I have had occasion to observe elsewhere, did either he or his followers apparently know the nonideal facts about imperialism, slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, and their ilk, that have shaped the United States and the modern world so profoundly and that constitute an ongoing and central injustice yet to be tackled by Rawlsians. How is this possible? Haven't they noticed they're living in one of the most race-conscious societies in the world, with a history of hundreds of years of white supremacy? Again, how can one resist the obvious conclusion that it is the fact- and reality-avoidance of ideal theory that underwrites such ignorance? In *A Theory of Justice*, as earlier cited, Rawls argues for ideal theory on the grounds that while the injustices of partial compliance are the "pressing and urgent matters," we need to begin with ideal theory as "the only basis for the systematic grasp of these more pressing problems" (8). But then why, in the thirty-plus years up to his death, was he still at the beginning? Why was this promised shift of theoretical attention endlessly deferred, not just in his own writings but in the vast majority of his followers? My colleague Tony Laden has given me the following two remarkable pieces of information: (1) in a 1999 five-volume collection of eighty-eight essays from three decades of writing on Rawls (Richardson and Weithman, 1999), only *one* of the included essays deals with race, that being an article by the African-American philosopher Laurence Thomas; (2) in the recently published *Cambridge Companion to Rawls* (Freeman 2003), not a single one of the fourteen chapters has race as either a theme or even a subtheme. What does this say about the evasions of ideal theory? Is it that the United States has long since achieved racial justice, so there is no need to theorize it?

Or consider another example, where the opening for a discussion of race is actually explicitly part of the text, rather than perennially postponed to

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the tomorrow that never comes. In another classic book on justice from three decades ago, Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974), Nozick defended the libertarian position that justice consists simply in the respect for property rights and those rights that can be derived from them: justice in original acquisition, justice in transfer, and rectificatory justice (150–53). Nozick would some years later repudiate the book, though not with any detail. But *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* remains the most theoretically sophisticated libertarian text, a bible to the far right. Philosophers of color, in keeping with their social origins, are generally liberal to radical, social-democratic to Marxist, finding such views anathema. Yet as was pointed out even at the time, the potential implications of Nozick's view were at least in some respects actually not conservative at all, but very radical, indeed revolutionary. There could hardly be a greater and more clear-cut violation of property rights in U.S. history than Native American expropriation and African slavery. And Nozick says explicitly (though hedging that he knows of no sophisticated treatment of the question) that populations to whom an injustice has been done are entitled to rectificatory justice that "will make use of its best estimate of subjunctive information about what would have occurred . . . if the injustice had not taken place" (152–53). So here the principle of rectification is *explicitly* demarcated as one of the three basic principles of justice. But in the large literature on Nozick—not as large as Rawls, but substantive nonetheless—the matter of reparations for Native Americans and blacks has hardly ever been discussed. Whence this silence, considering that not even the mental effort of doing a Rawlsian race-behind-the-veil job is required? Doesn't discussion of this issue "logically" follow from Nozick's own premises? And the answer is, of course, that logic radically underdetermines what actually gets thought about, researched, and written up in philosophy journals and books. White philosophers are not the population affected by these issues, so for the most part white philosophers have not been concerned about them. "Ideally" one would have expected that the pages of libertarian journals, and also mainstream journals, would have been ringing with debates on this matter. But of course they are not. Only recently, as a result of black activism, has the issue of reparations become less than completely marginal nationally. (For example, see Boxill 2003.) And apart from white racial disinterest as a factor (or, more pointedly phrased, active white racial interest in *not* raising these questions), another contributory factor must surely be Nozick's utterly fanciful opening chapters, which utilize the concept of a "process-defective potential explanation" (an explanation relying on a process that one knows did *not* actually explain the phenomenon in question [!]) to account for how the state arose. Such an account supposedly packs "explanatory punch and illumination, even if incorrect. We learn much by seeing how the state could have arisen, even if it didn't arise that way" (8–9). Ideal theory with a vengeance! So an entitlement theory of "justice in holdings" that prides itself on being

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"historical," by contrast with the "current time-slice principles" of utilitarianism, egalitarianism, Rawlsianism, and so on, falls conveniently silent when it comes to the obviously crucial question of the *actual* origins and *actual* history of the United States government. Think how differently constructed the book would have had to have been if this flagrantly *non*ideal history of racial injustice had been confronted instead of being marginalized to an endnote (344n2).

So the abstractions of ideal theory are not innocent. Nor, as is sometimes pretended, have they simply descended from a celestial Platonic conceptual realm. Apart from their general link with the historic evasions of liberalism, they can be seen in the U.S. context in particular as exacerbated philosophical versions of apologist concepts long hegemonic in the self-image of the nation. In an important recent work in American political science, *Civic Ideals* (1997), Rogers Smith argues that the dominant tradition in studies of American political culture has long been to represent it as an egalitarian liberal democracy free of the hierarchical and exclusionary social structures of Europe. Taking the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville, Gunnar Myrdal, and Louis Hartz as exemplary, Smith shows that all three writers, even when they admit the existence of racism and sexism in national practices, public policy, legal rules, and central ideologies, still fall back on the conceptualization of an essentially inclusive "liberal democracy." So racism and sexism are framed as "anomalies" to a political culture conceived of as—despite everything—basically egalitarian. Despite the long history of racial subordination of nonwhites (Native American expropriation, black slavery and Jim Crow, Mexican annexation, Chinese exclusion, Japanese internment), despite the long history of legal and civic restrictions on women, the polity is still thought of as essentially liberal-democratic. The result is that mainstream political theory has not, until very recently, thought about and taken seriously what would be necessary to achieve genuine racial and gender equality. I suggest that this is a perfect complement, in the more empirical realm of political science, to the abstractions in the more rarefied realm of ethics and political philosophy. In both cases, an idealized model is being represented as capturing the actual reality, and in both cases this misrepresentation has been disastrous for an adequate understanding of the real structures of oppression and exclusion that characterize the social and political order. The opting for "ideal" theory has served to rationalize the status quo.

Finally, I would suggest that a nonideal approach is also superior to an ideal approach in being better able to *realize* the ideals, by virtue of realistically recognizing the obstacles to their acceptance and implementation. In this respect, the debate between ideal and nonideal theory can be seen as part of a larger and older historic philosophical dispute between idealism and materialism. I am using "materialism" here as a term of art, not in the sense it is often meant—as a repudiation of ethics in the name of amorality and realpolitik—but to signify the commitment to locating moral theory in society and the interactions of human

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beings as actually shaped by social structures, by "material" social privilege and disadvantage. Recognizing how people's social location may both blind them to important realities and give them a vested interest in maintaining things as they are is a crucial first step toward changing the social order. Ideal theory, by contrast, too often simply disregards such problems altogether or, ignoring the power relations involved, assumes it is just a matter of coming up with better arguments. Summing it all up, then, one could say epigrammatically that the best way to bring about the ideal is by recognizing the nonideal, and that by assuming the ideal or the near-ideal, one is only guaranteeing the perpetuation of the nonideal.

Notes

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1. It can, admittedly, serve the interests of *particular* individuals in these groups, who can then be anointed by the establishment as the female or black dissident "courageous" enough to speak out against the "victim mentality" of their peers (with appropriate rewards and recognition for said courage to follow)—but not the interests of the group as a whole. My thanks to Margaret Urban Walker for reminding me of this important point.

2. Here the following obvious objection might be raised: isn't *A Theory of Justice* a work in ideal theory that, especially with the rightward shift in the United States in the three decades since it first appeared, articulates a radical political vision now far outside the mainstream? My response would be: (1) To the extent that the radical egalitarian tilt of Rawls's book is justified by advertence to the ways in which people are disadvantaged by their class background, it is drawing precisely on (a subsection of) the *non*ideal facts that nonideal theory sees as crucial, and so in this respect is *departing* from pure ideal theory. But even here, Rawls's left-liberalism leaves him open to criticisms from those on the Marxist left with a less sanguine, arguably more realistic, picture of the unjust effects of the class inequalities his theory leaves intact—see, for example, the criticisms by R. G. Peffer (1990). (2) As will be discussed in greater detail later, his idealization of the family and marginalization of the history of U.S. slavery and Jim Crow so shape the book that it does *not* address gender and racial oppression, and what measures would be necessary to dismantle them and achieve gender and racial justice. So its radicalism, praiseworthy as it is, is basically restricted to issues along a (white male) class axis.

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