

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT
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Ethical Theory: In Praise of Idleness

On the standard conception, the aim of systematic ethical theorizing is to develop an ideal criterion of rightness that can justify our particular ethical judgments. Agents should have an overriding commitment to that criterion, and though they need not use it as a decision procedure on each particular occasion, their ordinary motivations have value only insofar as they provide a heuristic implementation of that ideal criterion. But there's a second, more relaxed conception of ethical theorizing, on which we accept our current ethical standards and employ theoretical criteria only as tools to guide local improvement. In my dissertation, I offer some words in praise of idleness.

The first part argues that adopting the standard conception, epitomized by R. M. Hare, leads to various kinds of instability. The tension between our ordinary motivations and the deliverances of theory causes an unhealthy bifurcation in our thinking, leads to alienation from our personal commitments, and implies that we have false beliefs about our reasons. I develop a more relaxed conception that avoids these undesirable outcomes. Drawing an analogy to P. F. Strawson's distinction between the reactive and objective attitudes, I argue that ethical theorizing, like the objective attitude, can play both an explanatory and ameliorative role without being taken as the final truth about our practices.

The second part focuses on what I consider to be the best tool for improvement: a utilitarian criterion inspired by J. S. Mill. I outline a theory, actual practice utilitarianism, on which an act is right if it is permitted by an actual practice in one's current context, so long as that practice is not structurally incompatible with the overall good. I show how this theory makes better sense of our practices of regret, toleration, and punishment than a standard maximizing act-utilitarian theory, and I apply the theory to the vexed issue of partiality, explaining how it generates limited reasons to reform. Finally, I argue that while the standard conception leads to what Mill calls 'moral unfreedom'—in which the will is unfree because of an overriding commitment, higher with respect to any possible object of choice, to an ethical theory—taking a more relaxed attitude toward actual practice utilitarianism allows us to have multiple independent priorities, none of which trumps all the rest. Ethical theory still has a role to play, but we have to hold it more lightly.