

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Non-Ideal Practices: An Essay on Ethical Theory and Deliberation

On the standard conception, the aim of ethical theorizing is to develop an ideal criterion of rightness that dictates the obligatory, permissible, and forbidden actions in every conceivable situation. 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 is a second, more flexible conception, on which agents act according to the norms of their local practices and appeal to theory only when those norms prove insufficient to resolve particular problems. In my dissertation, I write in praise of flexibility.

Part I argues that adopting the standard conception, epitomized by R. M. Hare, is bad for agents. The tension between our ordinary motivations and the deliverances of theory causes an unhealthy bifurcation in our thinking, leads to alienation from our psychological makeup, and embroils us in rational inconsistency. The more flexible view avoids these undesirable outcomes. Drawing an analogy to P. F. Strawson's psychology of reactive and objective attitudes, I argue that ethical theorizing, like the objective attitude, plays both an explanatory and an ameliorative role without being taken as the sole justification of our practices.

This flexible view of the *role* of theory places constraints on its *form*, now regarded as non-ideal. Part II develops an actual practice utilitarianism inspired by J. S. Mill and William James. I defend a criterion on which an act is right if it is permitted by an actual practice in one's current context, so long as that practice better promotes the well-being of those who are affected by it than previously adopted practices. I show how this theory makes better sense of regret, toleration, and punishment than a standard maximizing act-utilitarian theory, and I apply it to the vexed issue of partiality, explaining how it generates only 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 to an ethical theory, higher with respect to any possible object of choice—taking a more flexible attitude toward actual practice utilitarianism allows us to have multiple independent priorities, none of which surpasses all the rest. If we can't live *with* theory, in the ideal sense, we can't live *without* it, in the non-ideal sense.