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Ideal and Nonideal Reasoning in Educational Theory¹

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Abstract:

The terms “ideal theory” and “non-ideal theory” are used in contemporary Anglophone political philosophy to identify alternative methodological approaches for justifying normative claims. Each term is used in multiple ways. This article disentangles several versions of ideal and non-ideal theory with a view to determining which elements may be helpful in designing models of real-world justice that are contextually relevant, morally plausible, and practically feasible.

1. Justification in moral and political philosophy

A spectre is haunting moral and political philosophy--the spectre of relativism. Other names for the spectre are subjectivism, skepticism, and even non-cognitivism. The spectre is raised in part by the commitment to a sharp fact-value distinction. If “ought” cannot be derived from “is,” so that normative claims can never be established through empirical observation, how then can such claims be justified?

Western philosophers have tried to lay to rest the spectre of relativism by proposing many methods for justifying normative claims. The methods include appealing to universalizability and the principle of non-contradiction, appealing to fundamental moral principles such as the Greatest Happiness Principle, and appealing to intuitions. Philosophers have also advocated various methods that rely on “idealization.”

Methods are techniques or strategies used for accomplishing particular tasks and methodology is critical reflection on those methods. Philosophical methodology is critical reflection on methods for doing philosophy. It considers what should count as evidence or data in a particular field of philosophy (e.g. intuitions, principles, logic, facts, discourses), prescribes procedures for gathering and processing that evidence, and offers explanations as to why some methods are better or worse than others for various kinds of philosophical work. So methodological theories in philosophy propose rationales for using some methods rather than others for particular philosophical purposes. In this essay, I offer some methodological proposals for political philosophers aiming to design just educational institutions for real world situations.

Methods purporting to justify normative claims must meet several necessary conditions of adequacy. Two conditions are inspired by Onora O’Neill’s concern for “followability” in practical reasoning. O’Neill uses this term in two senses: ²

1. First, she notes that adequate methods of reasoning must be intelligible to and usable by everyone in the situation where they are being employed.

“We fail to reason as soon as we make moves which we hold that others for whom we expect reasons to be cogent cannot follow; we must expect such moves to seem bafflingly arbitrary to those others” (1996, 60).

O’Neill calls this condition “followability in thought.”

2. O’Neill also asserts that practical reasoning can advocate only proposals that are genuine possibilities for action in the relevant sphere:

“Proposals for action will therefore not be reasoned unless they are not only intelligible, but real possibilities for those who are to be offered reasons for certain recommendations or prescriptions, warnings or proscriptions....We cannot give others reason for adopting principles which we do not think they could adopt.” ³

Methods are inadequate if the political principles they generate are not “followable in action” by those involved.

3. To these conditions, I would add that good methods must enable us to identify political principles that are specific enough to be action-guiding—while bearing in mind that all principles require interpretation in context.
4. Above all, good methods must reliably generate political principles that indeed are morally acceptable. The worst way a method can fail is by rationalizing principles that legitimate injustice or wrongdoing.

2. Five examples of idealizing methods in moral and political philosophy

Much of the current philosophical debate about idealization in political philosophy focuses on Rawls, in part because he introduced the term “ideal theory” into political philosophy. In the next section, I discuss Rawls’s version of ideal theory but only in order to draw more general methodological lessons. Philosophical practices of idealization began long before Rawls and so did critiques of them.

Here are five examples of idealizing methods used by political philosophers for justifying normative claims. All invoke considerations that are counterfactual and often empirically impossible:

1. The first method is imagining models of alternative and better societies. Ingrid Robeyns has called these philosophical models mythical Paradise Islands.⁴ Plato’s *Republic*, More’s *Utopia*, and the ideal of pure communism are widely recognized to be unattainable. Such idealized models are not intended to be working blueprints, guiding the details of real world arrangements.

Instead, they are intended for use as moral/political polestars—indicating general compass directions for travel but not specifying the best routes on the ground. In order for this sort of ideal theory to be action-guiding in the real world, it must be supplemented by non-ideal theory which is used to figure out how the ideal may best be institutionalized in non-ideal conditions.

2. A second example of idealizing methods is social contract theories such as those developed by Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and others. Social contract theories recount stories about agreements made in an imagined state of nature. The agreements are generally recognized to be fictional.
3. A third idealizing method used by philosophers is postulating ideal agents or impartial observers.⁵ Ideal observers are imagined to make moral judgments without being influenced by the biases that supposedly contaminate the thinking of those occupying particular social positions. Such agents or observers may also be imagined as ‘ideal’ in other ways; for instance, philosophers may stipulate that ideal observers are in possession of all the non-moral facts relevant to the judgments they have to make and/or that they are ideal reasoners, immune to logical mistakes.⁶ Philosophers using this method do not suppose that ideal observers could ever exist empirically.
4. The method of “reversibility” prescribes that moral agents should imagine being people other than themselves. Although such imaginative feats are impossible, this method is nonetheless recommended by several prominent philosophers. R. M. Hare suggests using it in order to determine whether a proposed course of action is universalizable⁷ and Habermas says that the impartiality of judgment is expressed in a principle that constrains *all* affected to adopt the perspectives of *all others* in the balancing of interests.”⁸ Seyla Benhabib argues that taking the “viewpoint of humanity” requires moral agents to engage in egalitarian discourses where they “practice the reversibility of standpoints.”⁹
5. The final type of idealization that I will mention is the very large class of imagined philosophical cases presenting fictional brains in vats, fat men blocking the mouths of caves or being pushed in front of trolleys, children drowning in shallow ponds, and famous violinists being hooked up to the bodies of their hospital neighbors. Contemporary moral/political philosophy is full of these sorts of “thought experiments,” many of which are impossibly far-fetched. Some philosophers relish the fantastical elements of such stories, while non-philosophers sometimes ask how grown-up academics can play such absurd games.

Why are philosophers so fond of idealization? Different idealizing methods are rationalized in different ways:

1. In defending the “Paradise Island” approach, John A. Simmons suggests that political philosophy cannot necessarily be pursued piecemeal. “There is no reason to suppose in advance that justice in

one domain is independent of justice in other domains.” We need an “integrated ideal” to ensure proposals in one area will be consistent with proposals in other areas.¹⁰

2. Classical social contract theories were intended as “rational reconstructions” of human thinking about the moral authority of the state. They purported to justify the *prima facie* obligation to obey the law by showing that it would be in people’s rational self-interest to accept the coercion and inequality that are intrinsic to state power because only the state can guarantee freedom and equality.
3. Ideal observers are heuristic devices intended to make vivid the regulative ideal of impartiality. Postulating them is supposed to help philosophers recognize bias in particular situations.
4. The method of reversibility is intended to help philosophers determine which moral prescriptions are truly universalizable by imagining whether or not they would be acceptable to others in differing situations.
5. Thought experiments are intended to clarify our concepts and normative judgments. They “pump” our often uncertain intuitions by asking what we would think in situations that are somehow analogous.

3. How and why Rawls uses idealization

Rawls is the pre-eminent political philosopher of the twentieth century. His *Theory of Justice* aims to determine what principles of justice would characterize a fair system of social cooperation, in which “the liberties of equal citizenship are taken as settled.”¹¹ In addressing this question, Rawls utilizes several idealizing methods.

3.1. Beginning with the “well-ordered” society

In developing his fundamental principles of distributive justice, Rawls postulates a “well-ordered” or “perfectly just” society that he recognizes to be unattainable in the real world. A central characteristic of this imagined ideal society is that “(e)veryone is presumed to act justly and to do his part in upholding just institutions.”¹² Rawls calls this a society of “strict” rather than “partial compliance.” He also postulates the counter-factual assumptions that a well-ordered society is largely self-sufficient and “conceived as a closed system isolated from other societies.”¹³ In thinking philosophically about the well-ordered society, Rawls explicitly brackets issues of injustice, such as punishment, just war, rebellion, and compensation.¹⁴

The “well-ordered society” is Rawls’s version of Paradise Island. Why does Rawls posit a society that is not only non-existent but also empirically impossible? For him the point of beginning with ideal theory in this sense is that clarifying “the nature and aims of a perfectly just society” provides “the only basis for the systematic grasp” of the more “pressing and urgent problems” of injustice and partial compliance.¹⁵ Rawls’s thought seems to be that philosophers will better understand the confusing

complexities of the real world if they begin by reflecting on simplified models. He writes, “Thus while the principles belong to the theory of an ideal state of affairs, they are generally relevant.”¹⁶ A well-ordered society is intended to offer “a conception of a just basic structure and an ideal of the person compatible with it that can serve as a standard for appraising institutions and for guiding the overall direction of social change.”¹⁷

3.2. Reasoning from the original position

In determining which principles would regulate a well-ordered society, Rawls uses a famously idealized method of justification. He postulates a hypothetical “original position,” in which parties meet to discuss the fundamental and permanent principles of justice used to regulate the future society they will inhabit.

Just as the original position is not a real-world state of affairs, so the parties in original position are not real people. They are fictional humanoids, whose characteristics are deliberately specified to ensure that they agree on pre-determined outcomes. The characteristics that Rawls assigns the parties include freedom, equality, instrumental rationality, mutual disinterest, a sense of justice, and ties of sentiment to their immediate families. The parties are also located behind a “veil of ignorance,” which prevents them from knowing their particular places in society, their fortunes in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, and their conceptions of the good.¹⁸ Each of these characteristics is intended to constrain the agreements made by the parties so as to ensure that the resulting principles are freely agreed, impartial, and sustainable.

Rawls’s elaborate “philosophical conceit” combines an abstract version of the contractarian approach mentioned earlier with elements of ideal observer theory. He aims to develop a method of justification stronger than either intuitionism or utilitarianism. Appealing directly to intuitions carries the danger of rationalizing conventional beliefs because our intuitions are developed in unjust societies and may be shaped by mistaken values. Intuitionism is therefore a morally unreliable method. Rawls is also critical of utilitarianism which in his view fails normatively because it does not take seriously the separateness of persons. Methodologically, utilitarianism posits a foundational principle that is *a prioristic* and question begging. Rawls presents thinking from the original position as a contrast to these methods. He intends it as an expository device that not only articulates our sense of justice but also explains and justifies it by demonstrating that his principles of justice are those that would be agreed by free rational agents. Rawls asserts that the original position allows us to attain imaginatively a moral perspective, or “Archimedean point” that is objective, impartial, and universal. “(T)o see our place in society from the perspective of this position is to see it *sub specie aeternitatis*: it is to regard the human not only from all social but also from all temporal points of view.”¹⁹

4. From Paradise Islands to realistic utopias

Despite the impressive scope and humanity of Rawls's theory of justice, many philosophers have argued that it fails its basic aim of guaranteeing equal citizenship to all. Specifically, it fails to guarantee equal citizenship to a number of vulnerable populations, such as those who are racialized, or disabled, or caretakers for those unable to care for themselves, the last group being disproportionately women. Rawls makes clear his personal commitments to racial and gender equality in several passing comments but he does not integrate these commitments into his philosophical theory which disregards several aspects of human life that profoundly affect people's life prospects. These include racial injustice, disability, the household division of labor, and the need for hands-on care. Critics of Rawls have argued that excluding these topics from his model of the well-ordered society systematically biases Rawls's theory against specific populations.²⁰ They charge that Rawls's theory presents ideals of human agency and society that are not only practically unrealizable for many people but also morally inadequate. Indeed, justice-as-fairness may be ideological insofar as it obscures and rationalizes injustice.

Why does Rawls's theory ignore some systemic injustices? With respect to disability, household labor, and the care of vulnerable others, it may simply not have occurred to Rawls to question the Western liberal tradition of relegating these matters to private life, outside the domain of justice. With respect to racism, Rawls may have assumed that this (unlike income class) would not exist in an ideal society and so he may have thought that it could be considered later, along with other issues of injustice. Charles Mills argues forcefully that Rawls's lack of attention to racism suggests that he views this topic not as part of the primary subject of justice but instead as a philosophically secondary matter of "application."²¹ Mills contends that the "endless deferral" of race by Rawls and his followers amounts to philosophically marginalizing deep structural injustices that fundamentally affect the life chances of every citizen in the United States.

In Mills's view, the inadequacy of Rawls's theory of justice results from the inadequacy of his methodology, particularly his reliance on ideal theory. In explaining this criticism, Mills draws on O'Neill's distinction between abstraction and idealization. O'Neill says:

Abstraction, taken straightforwardly, is a matter of *bracketing*, but not of *denying*, predicates that are true of the matter under discussion. Abstraction *in this strict sense* is theoretically and practically unavoidable....All uses of language must be more or less abstract and so must all reasoning...Idealization is another matter...An assumption, and derivatively, a theory idealizes when it ascribes predicates—often seen as enhanced, 'ideal' predicates—that are false of the case in hand, and so denies predicates that are true of that case. For example, if human beings are assumed to have capacities and capabilities for rational choice or self-sufficiency or independence from others that are evidently not

achieved by many or even by any actual human beings, the result is not mere abstraction; it is idealization.”²²

Using these definitions, idealized models are not merely simplifications; they are positive falsifications.

Constructing idealized models is a valuable and often indispensable method for developing scientific theories but O’Neill and Mills agree that it is dangerous for practical reasoning. Mills charges that using idealized models is likely to distract political philosophers from real world injustice because “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.” He asks:

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?²³

Mills’s challenge resonates with a long tradition of ridiculing philosophy as wishful thinking, a tradition which motivated classical Marxism to emphasize an alleged distinction between “scientific” and “utopian socialism”.²⁴ Ingrid Robeyns’s language of Paradise Island plays on this tradition, implying that ideal theory encourages philosophers to become dreamers of impossible dreams.

Over the past two decades, philosophers have engaged in a vigorous debate over the merits of ideal versus non-ideal theory. What is at stake in these debates is not always clear because philosophers use the terms “ideal theory” and “non-ideal theory” with a variety of meanings. However, one “idealized” approach that is often challenged by self-styled non-ideal theorists is the method of beginning philosophical reasoning by sketching a vision of a normatively ideal society (a “Paradise Island”) To guide action in the real world, ideal theory in this sense must be supplemented with non-ideal theory, which is charged with figuring out how to build the ideal in non-ideal circumstances. Elizabeth Anderson offers several reasons why political philosophers should instead begin with non-ideal theory.²⁵ First, we need to tailor our principles to the motivational and cognitive capacities of real people, as opposed to ideal citizens. Second, we need empirically adequate understandings of the underlying causes of injustice. Third, ideal theory may lack the conceptual resources needed to recognize and understand real world injustices. Anderson’s overall point is that constructing Paradise Islands is an unreliable method for thinking philosophically about justice because idealized models are likely to disregard aspects of the real world that are crucially relevant to assessing the justice of existing institutions and to determining the practical feasibility of proposed alternatives.

Some philosophers assume that relinquishing ideal theory means that political philosophers must refrain from developing large scale systematic ideals; for instance, Simmons suggests that, without ideal theory, political philosophy could only be done piecemeal and would be limited to addressing particular manifestations of injustice. However, Anderson does not draw this conclusion. Despite her critique of

ideal theory, Anderson offers a far-reaching ideal of racial integration whose attainability is not self-evident and which may easily be interpreted as advocating the elimination of “race as we know it”—though Anderson herself stops short of this conclusion. When I was younger and bolder, I advocated a classless, genderless society.²⁶ Are such large and systematic ideals too speculative to have philosophical value?

In my view, one indispensable task for political philosophers (though certainly not the only task) is to develop what might be called realistic utopias. I borrow this term from the later Rawls, though I do not use it in exactly his sense. In my usage, realistic utopias resemble Paradise Islands in being fairly comprehensive or systemic models of better societies but they do not neglect immediate problems (such as racism) and are plausibly achievable from where we are now. To maximize the probability of developing social ideals that are realistic in the senses of being contextually relevant, morally adequate, and practically feasible, I contend that philosophers should utilize a non-ideal or naturalized approach to moral reasoning. I sketch this methodological approach in the next section.

5. Using Non-ideal Reasoning to Design Realistic Utopias

5.1. Reasoning toward justification must be intersubjective

Justification is a social process which consists in giving accounts and exchanging reasons. It is not enough to offer reasons for normative claims; others must recognize the reasoning as sound. Rawls is well aware that justification is inherently social and he distinguishes it explicitly from logical proof:

Justification is argument addressed to those who disagree with us or to ourselves when we are of two minds.... Thus mere proof is not justification. A proof simply displays logical relations between propositions. But proofs become justification once the starting points are mutually recognized, or the conclusions so comprehensive and compelling as to persuade us of the soundness of the conception expressed by their premises.²⁷

Despite recognizing that justification involves persuading others, Rawls’s early reasoning is often characterized as monological. Not only does he offer an elaborate thought experiment, but the experiment postulates a discussion among parties imagined as identical with each other, all with the same motivations, valued goods and reasoning strategies. It is actually misleading to present the parties’ conversation as a discussion because the parties are interchangeable, no variety in perspectives is postulated and so the conversation is logically equivalent to a monologue. Like ideal observers, the parties in the original position are philosophers’ puppets or (like the Wizard of Oz) amplifiers for their own voices.

Discourse ethics is a meta-ethical theory which contends that validating normative claims requires moving beyond philosophical thought experiments to intersubjective discourse in the real world (Habermas 1990). Discourse ethicists have led the way in pointing to the limits of monological reasoning. Conceptions of justice produced by monological practices can only be as good as

the political imaginations of their authors and everyone's imaginative capacities are inevitably limited. We can all construct theories that are internally consistent but we need to move beyond imagining what others might say to engaging directly with others in actual intersubjective reasoning.

Rawls is not oblivious of the real world, of course. He presents his theory as a proposal for other philosophers' comments and his later work in fact takes up a number of their criticisms. However, Rawls's conception of moral justification is also monological in another sense. He says that the goal of a philosophical theory of justice is to describe the sense of justice possessed by a single person:

I shall take for granted that these principles are either approximately the same for persons whose judgments are in reflective equilibrium, or if not, that their judgments divide along a few main lines represented by the family of traditional doctrines that I shall discuss.... (If we should be able to characterize one (educated) person's sense of justice, we would have a good beginning toward a theory of justice.... So for the purposes of this book, the views of the reader and the author are the only ones that count. The opinions of others are used only to clear our own heads.²⁸

This assertion is troubling. When people disagree, we often need to do more than clear our heads. We may need to change our own or other people's minds. Rawls acknowledges the possibility that our sense of justice might require "substantial revision"²⁹ but his analogy between our sense of justice and our sense of correct grammar assumes that the likelihood of radical disagreement is remote. Although Rawls says, "If men's conceptions of justice finally turn out to differ, the ways in which they do so is a matter of first importance"³⁰, his early work offers no suggestions for addressing such differences.

5.2. Reasoning toward justification must be empirical not hypothetical

Discourse ethics insists that normative claims cannot be validated through philosophical thought experiments but instead require real-world discourse. However, not all discourse will do. Briefly, discourse theorists regard moral claims as justified only if they emerge from processes of argumentation that conform to certain rules designed to capture the conditions of "a speech situation immune to repression and inequality."³¹ Habermas contends that these rules are not mere conventions but instead express the "unavoidable" or universal and necessary presuppositions of argumentative speech.³²

Ideal speech situations or "unrestricted communication communities" are rare and perhaps impossible in the real world. Humans are culturally diverse, socially unequal, and driven by many motives other than the search for truth. Habermas of course is aware of this and writes that, in real life, we must be satisfied with an "approximation adequate enough for the purpose of argumentation."³³ Just as scientific conclusions may be objective despite being based on evidence that is fallible in principle, so moral conclusions may be valid even when based on reasoning that is contestable in principle. Habermas thinks it is simply necessary to establish institutional measures "to sufficiently neutralize empirical

limitations and avoidable internal and external interference so that the idealized conditions always already presupposed by participants in argumentation can at least be adequately approximated.”³⁴

Although Habermas recognizes that justifying normative claims in the real world requires designing discursive arrangements capable of ensuring that the voices of people in marginalized and vulnerable populations are heard and receive uptake, he offers no practical suggestions for accomplishing this. Perhaps he thinks that this is a task for political science rather than political philosophy. However, without some plausible grounds to believe that something approximating ideal discourse is possible in the real world, we have no reason to suppose that moral skepticism can be avoided. Without such grounds, the ideal speech situation is a discursive Paradise Island.

5.3. Reasoning toward justification must be inclusive

At the moral heart of philosophical liberalism is the liberal criterion of justification, the idea that political principles must be justifiable to those who live under them. This criterion is intuitively appealing but also famously problematic. Here, I will set aside several important issues raised by the liberal criterion, such as how the demos should be demarcated and how we can determine when people are sufficiently informed, rational, and uncoerced that they can count as giving genuine consent.³⁵ Instead, I will focus on the condition of “followability in thought,” the need for people to be able to understand and utilize whatever reasoning method is used in justifying political claims. The following examples illustrate that the liberal criterion of justification has not been taken seriously by many well-known philosophers.

Rawls sometimes seems to suggest that anyone can easily reason from the original position. He writes,

Once we grasp this conception (of the original position), we can at any time look at the social world from the required point of view...The perspective of eternity is not a perspective from a certain place beyond the world, nor the point of view of a transcendent being; rather it is a certain form of thought and feeling that rational persons can adopt within the world...³⁶

Elsewhere, however, Rawls states that “[a] correct account of moral capacities will certainly involve principles and theoretical constructions which go much beyond the norms and standards cited in everyday life; it may eventually require fairly sophisticated mathematics as well.”³⁷ Regardless of its other strengths or weaknesses, reasoning from the original position is a method clearly designed for philosophers rather than ordinary people. It does not provide a method of justification that is followable or usable by people lacking the training and time of academic philosophers.

The methodological approach recommended by discourse ethics explicitly mandates inclusion of all affected by a normative proposal, so it is harder to see that in practice this method too is exclusionary. However, Theresa Tobin and I have argued elsewhere that the method advocated by discourse ethics is covertly biased against those with less power and privilege in the contemporary global order.³⁸ We

contend that discourse ethics relies on accounts of the moral domain, moral subjectivity, and moral reasoning that purport to be culturally neutral and universal but in fact embody moral perspectives specific to modern Western cultures. By insisting that authoritative claims can be produced only through reasoning in accordance with this model, discourse ethics disguises partiality as impartiality and opens the way for philosophy itself to be used as a tool of repression.

A final example of exclusivity in philosophical conceptions of reasoning is provided by the later Rawls's idea of "public reason." This prescribes how normative political claims should be justified in a liberal society. Rawls's conception of "reasonableness" constrains what type of claims may be considered, what type of reasons may be brought forward in considering them, and what type of people may participate.³⁹ Many philosophers have argued that Rawls's ideal of reasonableness is exclusionary, preventing moral perspectives that deserve attention from being considered or justified in their own terms.⁴⁰

5.4. Reasoning toward justification must be fitted to specific contexts

Why have prominent Western philosophers so frequently proposed models of normative justification that are exclusionary and therefore biased? Tobin and I contend that philosophers have assumed overly idealized conceptions of both the mission and the method of moral epistemology.

Political justification always occurs in particular contexts. The need for it arises when a particular action or social practice faces a specific challenge and must be justified to a particular challenger or group of challengers. Justification cannot succeed unless the reasons offered are "followable" by everyone involved and followability is always relative to particular audiences on particular occasions.⁴¹ Real-world reasoning is always expressed via the concepts and cultural resources that are available in particular contexts and this means that appropriate vocabularies and forms of reasoning cannot simply be assumed, but instead must be negotiated and perhaps invented. It is question-begging and dogmatic to insist that only our reasons are good; those with whom we are disputing must also recognize them as good.

Tobin and I argue that taking seriously the inevitable situatedness of real world argumentation requires rethinking the mission of moral epistemology.⁴² We contend that it is a mistake to pursue a singular ideal of reasoning designed to regulate moral/political argumentation in all contexts. Rather than seeking one-size-fits-all models of justificatory reasoning, Tobin and I propose that moral epistemology should take its mission to be developing multiple models of reasoning suited to a variety of circumstances and accompanied by guidelines explaining the types of contexts where the practices prescribed by the models likely "fit" or work best.

Once the mission of moral epistemology is reconceived, then its method must also be rethought. Tobin and I advocate that moral epistemologists should employ naturalized methods that are in radical contrast with philosophers' more usual idealized method of armchair imagining. We propose beginning

with case studies of real world practices of reasoning toward justification, with special attention to situations characterized by diversity and inequality. Our idea is to identify models of reasoning that actually work, rather than models simply imagined to work, and to explain why different models “fit” different types of contexts.⁴³

5.5. Reasoning toward justification cannot be entrusted to philosophers alone

Tobin’s and my methodological proposal is not the uncontroversial claim that empirical information is required at the level of application; instead, we propose that conceptions of reasoning be empirically informed also at the level of theory. This means that philosophical models of moral and political justification must incorporate multidisciplinary scholarship at all stages. Identifying case studies of successful reasoning practices requires collaborating with scholars from many disciplines, and with moral reasoners who are not academics.

5.6. Reasoning toward justification must be reflexive

Philosophers working collaboratively to develop new philosophical models of justification must reflect continually on our specific identities and situations. Who are we, for whom are we philosophizing, what are our credentials and authority? This kind of reflexivity will help us stay modest and humble, to remember that, if our conceptions of justification are useful at all, they are useful only for particular contexts, not for all times and places. Like justice, moral/political justification cannot be viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*.

6. Can idealized methods play any role in justifying realistic utopias?

It is currently fashionable for philosophers to talk about naturalizing epistemology and methodology. However, “naturalizing epistemology” is interpreted in almost as many confusing ways as “ideal” and “non-ideal theory”. The case-study based version of naturalizing moral epistemology that Tobin and I advocate is distinct from several other philosophical projects described as naturalizing epistemology. For example, we do not recommend what has become known as experimental philosophy, which collects survey data about peoples’ moral intuitions, nor do we advocate the investigation of brains.

Tobin’s and my version of naturalizing does not require rejecting all idealizing methods. Philosophy, like law, depends on arguments from analogy and there is no reason to avoid fictional thought experiments that may sharpen our thinking, so long as we keep remember the inevitability of disanalogies and keep in mind considerations of relevance to the real world. Even the much criticized method of reversibility may also sometimes serve as a good heuristic, so long as we remain mindful of the limits and dangers of imaginative identification.⁴⁴ In general, many idealizing methods may be used tactically in reasoning toward justifying political ideals, so long as they are used cautiously and in the context of broader reasoning strategies that are non-idealized and naturalized the sense that Tobin and I describe.⁴⁵

Although idealizing methods may play minor roles in justifying realistic utopias, the main role must be played by methods that are naturalized in the sense explained. Anderson suggests that we should start “from a diagnosis of injustices in our actual world, rather than from a picture of an ideal world.”⁴⁶ Tobin and I would add that philosophers should examine how these injustices are understood and conceptualized by those involved. Only such a naturalized approach to justificatory reasoning enables real-world reasoners to develop philosophical ideals that are realistic in the crucial senses mentioned earlier. In other words, only a naturalized approach to philosophical reasoning makes it possible for us to design social ideals that are contextually relevant, that include the moral and conceptual resources necessary for existing injustices to be properly articulated, and that offer credible possibilities for new forms of social life that are reachable from where we are now, and sustainable in real world contexts.⁴⁷

In the end, however, not even the best philosophical reasoning can guarantee that proposed utopias will be practically feasible. Anderson tells us that, in non-ideal theory, normative ideals do not function as unquestioned *a priori* standards of assessment but rather as hypotheses to be tested in experience.⁴⁸ Ultimately we can discover how far our political proposals are genuine possibilities only by trying to build them in the real world. Anderson offers examples of some social experiments in the egalitarian tradition that have turned out to be unrealistic and others that have proved to work well:

Various types of communal living have been repeatedly tried and repeatedly failed. Comprehensive centralized state-managed economies have been disastrous. Other experiments have been highly successful—democracy, social insurance, universal education, human rights.⁴⁹

When we find that our utopias are infeasible or unrealistic, we must be ready to revise them. Unlike Paradise Islands, epistemic status of realistic utopias is always provisional.

7. Designing realistic educational utopias

If designing realistic utopias is a work constantly in progress, where should that work begin? So many injustices confront us that it can be hard to decide where to start. Feminist standpoint theory advises us to begin with the problems facing those who are marginalized on society’s underside.⁵⁰

A recent article in *The Nation* hints how this methodological advice might guide philosophers of education aiming to design a realistically utopian public school system in New York City.⁵¹ The advice would recommend that philosophers should not begin with the much-discussed concerns of wealthy parents, such as overscheduling children, cronyism at 92nd St Y’s nursery school, and addressing obesity by banning large sugary drinks. Instead, it would advise philosophers to begin by addressing the concerns of poor parents, which include under-scheduling and lack of afterschool programming. Poor parents are also concerned about shortage of public preschools and the way the city’s public pre-K lottery picks

winners and losers among 4-year-olds. They worry that their children's obesity results from lack of physical education during school day or after-school sports programs.

All political philosophy is designed to address particular historical problems: Hobbes worries about civil disorder; Rawls worries about religious intolerance and class inequality; Anderson worries about unequal citizenship for African Americans. Addressing injustices experienced by those who are most disadvantaged in particular contexts, using the kind of naturalized and non-ideal reasoning that Tobin and I recommend, will help philosophers of education in developing ideals that are contextually relevant, morally adequate, and practically feasible. In other words, they will develop realistic educational utopias.

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² These conditions are similar to but not identical with those proposed by Alison M. Jaggar and Theresa W. Tobin, "Situating Moral Justification: Rethinking the Mission of Moral Epistemology," *Metaphilosophy* 44, no. 4, (2013): 383-408.

³ Onora O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue: A Constructive Account of Practical Reasoning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 57-8

⁴ Ingrid Robeyns, "Ideal Theory in Theory and Practice," *Social Theory and Practice* 34, no. 3 (2008): 341-362.

⁵ See Roderick Firth, "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 12, no. 3 (1952): 317-345. R. M. Hare postulates a superhuman 'archangel'; also see Richard M. Hare, *Moral Thinking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

⁶ See Adam Smith, *Theory of the Moral Sentiments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976 (1759)).; David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, eds. L.A. Selby-Bigge & P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978 (1740)), 2/e.; Roderick Firth, "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 12, no.3 (1952): 317-345.; Hare, *Moral Thinking*.

⁷ Hare recommends that a moral deliberator should identify sympathetically with each of the parties who will be affected if the proposal is implemented, imaginatively representing to herself each party's desires and aversions in turn. "When I have been the round of all the affected parties, and come back, in my own person, to make an impartial moral judgment giving equal weight to the interests of all parties, what can I possibly do except advocate that course which will, taken all in all, least frustrate the desires which I have imagined myself having? But this (it is plausible to go on) is to maximize satisfactions." R. M. Hare *Freedom and Reason*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963) p.123.

⁸ Jürgen Habermas, "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification," in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, translated by Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990) 65 (Emphasis in original.)

⁹ Seyla Benhabib, "In The Shadow of Aristotle and Hegel: Communicative Ethics and Current Controversies in Practical Philosophy," in *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 52.

¹⁰ John A. Simmons, "Ideal and Nonideal Theory," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 38, no. 1 (2010): 5-36.

¹¹ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

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- ¹² Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 8.
- ¹³ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 4-8.
- ¹⁴ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 8.
- ¹⁵ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 9.
- ¹⁶ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 246.
- ¹⁷ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 263.
- ¹⁸ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 12.
- ¹⁹ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 587.
- ²⁰ See Okin 1989; Eva Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York: Routledge, 1999). See also Charles W. Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (2005): 165-184.
- ²¹ Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," 165-184.
- ²² O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue*, 40-41.
- ²³ Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," 171.
- ²⁴ Frederick Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* translated by Edward Aveling (Chicago: Kerr 1908).
- ²⁵ Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 3-5).
- ²⁶ Alison M. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1983).
- ²⁷ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 508.
- ²⁸ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 50.
- ²⁹ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 49.
- ³⁰ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 50.
- ³¹ Juergen Habermas, "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification," in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 88-89. In earlier work, Habermas spoke of the rules as defining an ideal speech situation but later came to prefer the terminology of an "unrestricted communication community" (*die ideale Kommunikationsgemeinschaft*). He also sometimes speaks of constraint-free or domination-free communication.
- ³² Habermas, "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification," 81.
- ³³ Habermas, "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification," 91-92.
- ³⁴ Habermas, "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification," 93.
- ³⁵ For discussion of the former, see Robert E. Goodin, "Enfranchising All Affected Interests, and Its Alternatives," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 35, no. 1 (2007): 40-68.
- ³⁶ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 587.
- ³⁷ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 47.
- ³⁸ Jaggar and Tobin, "Situating Moral Justification: Rethinking the Mission of Moral Epistemology."
- ³⁹ The claims considered must be reasonable, the reasons offered must be only those that free and equal citizens may reasonably expect other free and equal citizens to accept, the people involved must be reasonable, not fanatics or ideologues. See John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples with The Idea of Public Reason Revisited* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- ⁴⁰ Marilyn Friedman, "John Rawls and the Political Coercion of Unreasonable People," in *The Idea of a Political Liberalism: Essays on Rawls*, eds. Victoria Davion and Clark Wolf (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).
- ⁴¹ O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue*, 60.
- ⁴² Jaggar and Tobin, "Situating Moral Justification."
- ⁴³ Theresa W. Tobin and Alison M. Jaggar, "Naturalizing Moral Justification: Rethinking the Method of Moral Epistemology," *Metaphilosophy* 44, no.4 (2013): 409-439.
- ⁴⁴ Lawrence Thomas, "Moral Deference," *Philosophical Forum* XIV, no. 1-3 (1992-3): 233-250.; Alison M. Jaggar, "Feminism and Moral Justification," in *Feminism in Philosophy*, eds. Miranda Fricker and Jennifer Hornsby, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 225-244.; Iris M. Young,

“Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder, and Enlarged Thought,” in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

⁴⁵ The distinction between idealization and abstraction should not be over-emphasized. Bracketing predicates may be logically distinct from explicitly denying their existence but, as O’Neill notes, abstractions can be philosophically dangerous when they direct philosophers’ attention away from things they should notice. Moreover, as I argue here, some idealizations can be useful even in practical reasoning.

⁴⁶ Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*, 3.

⁴⁷ One might ask how much detail should be included in a realistic utopia. Here we should remember Naomi Scheman’s point that what counts as accuracy in any context depends on our specific purposes; for example, what counts as an accurate measure of the length of a coastline depends on the purposes for which we are measuring the coast. (Naomi Scheman, *Engenderings: Constructions of Authority, Knowledge, and Privilege* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 206.) Philosophers need not design realistic utopias in full architectural detail. Not only is this an impractical aspiration; it is also inimical to real world democracy.

⁴⁸ Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*, 3-7.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Anderson, *The New Leveller*, (2012; Accessed Feb 1, 2014), <http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/the-new-leveller/>

⁵⁰ Sandra Harding, “Borderlands Epistemologies” in *Is Science Multicultural? Postcolonialisms, Feminisms, and Epistemologies*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

⁵¹ Betsy Reed, “How Bill de Blasio Changed the Conversation about Education,” *The Nation* (December 2013), <http://www.thenation.com/print/article/177716/how-bill-de-blasio-changed-conversation-about-education>. (Accessed 4 March, 2014.)