Phil Smith Symposium

NON-IDEAL THEORY AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

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I appreciate the honor of delivering this year's Phil Smith lecture. This provides an opportunity to draw together a set of ideas I have been working on for a number of years, and to show how they are related to each other. Together, I believe that they represent a different way of thinking about what the philosophy of education is, and how to go about doing it.

I understand non-ideal theory as a reaction against the Platonic tradition in philosophy. On the Platonic model, philosophy helps us identify ideals that are acontextual, ahistorical, and conceived in the abstract; in the *Republic* Plato compares this with creating a statue and polishing it to the highest degree of perfection imaginable. These ideals establish the timeless standards against which we judge our human aspirations toward truth, justice, and beauty. Of course, as imperfect creatures we can only ever partially achieve these ideals, but the reality of imperfection does nothing to change or challenge the nature of the ideal itself. We just need to work harder next time, to try to approximate the ideal ever more closely. Philosophy, on this view, functions to identify these ideals, and to continually inspire us in the endeavor toward them.

With non-ideal theory, it is not just a matter of recognizing that we can never fully attain our ideals; rather, we need structured ways of thinking about how to choose and act in a context that is intrinsically limited. As I would put it, we need to reconceive our norms within the context of human practice.

The foremost theorist of ideal/non-ideal theory is John Rawls. I want to review his ideas in the context of theories of justice, suggest some ways of reframing his distinction, and then bring this revised way of thinking about non-ideal theory to bear upon some problems in the philosophy of education.

I.

Rawls laid out the distinction of ideal and non-ideal theory in *A Theory of Justice*, and continued to elaborate it in subsequent work.[1] The basic idea is straightforward, and is summarized well by Simmons, quoting Rawls:

> "The intuitive idea is to split the theory of justice into two
> parts. The first or ideal part assumes strict compliance and
> works out the principles that characterize a well-ordered

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

society under favorable circumstances."[2] This "ideal part presents a conception of a just society that we are to achieve if we can. Existing institutions are to be judged in the light of this conception."[3] . . . "Nonideal theory asks how this long-term goal might be achieved, or worked toward, usually in gradual steps. It looks for courses of action that are morally permissible and politically possible as well as likely to be effective."[4]

This summary makes two key points very clear. The first point is that for Rawls ideal and non-ideal theories depend on each other: "non-ideal theories are theories of the second best relative to some way of specifying what the first best scenario looks like. A non-ideal theory must just be closer to reality in some sense than an ideal theory."[5] The second point is that a non-ideal theory is here conceived as a practical pathway *toward* the achievement of what an ideal theory requires: "the object of Rawls's nonideal theory is the eventual achievement of the ideal of perfect justice, not simply the elimination of particular or salient injustices."[6]

Here is where I begin to diverge from Rawls's account. I will propose here a different way of conceiving the relation of ideal and non-ideal theories. A step forward is suggested by Valentini's very helpful distinction of three different ways in which the non-ideal is different from the ideal:

First, "ideal theory" may be taken to mean "full-compliance theory," and "non-ideal theory" may be understood as "partial compliance" theory. If this how we think of the ideal/non-ideal distinction, then the debate on ideal and non-ideal theory focuses on the question of what duties and obligations apply to us in situations of partial compliance as opposed to situations of full compliance.

Second, "ideal theory" may be taken to mean "utopian or idealistic theory," and "non-ideal theory" may be understood as "realistic" theory. On this second reading of the "ideal/ non-ideal" distinction, the debate on ideal and non-ideal theory focuses on the question of whether feasibility

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[2] Ibid., 245.

[3] Ibid., 246.

[4] A. John Simmons, "Ideal and Nonideal Theory," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 38, no. 1 (2010): 7; John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 89.

[5] Nicole Hassoun, "A Thought on the Ideal and Non-ideal Theory Distinction," *Public Reason* (blog), Jan 26, 2010, http://publicreason.net/2010/01/26/.

[6] Simmons, "Ideal and Nonideal Theory," 21.

considerations should constrain normative political theorizing and, if so, what sorts of feasibility constraints should matter.

Third, and finally, "ideal theory" may indicate what one might call "end-state" theory, and "non-ideal theory" may be understood as "transitional" theory. If this is how we understand the ideal/non-ideal distinction, then the debate on ideal and non-ideal theory focuses on the question of whether a normative political theory should aim at identifying an ideal of societal perfection, or whether it should focus on transitional improvements without necessarily determining what the "optimum" is.[7]

What this discussion reveals is that it makes a great deal of difference whether one regards the non-ideal theory as dealing with what is "politically possible as well as likely to be effective"[8]—that is, accepting that our actual achievements in pursuing justice are partial, provisional, and bounded by what is possible, but nevertheless always directed toward the *eventual* achievement of the ideal—or whether one regards this distinction as between something which *by definition* is never fully achievable and the ways in which we operationalize that ideal in the real circumstances that confront us. I think this difference is crucial. The first regards the relation of non-ideal and ideal theory as an exercise in short term vs. long term perspective-taking: for example, in adopting transitional policies that are not ideally just as a way of achieving outcomes that may be more just. The second regards the difference more like the metaphysical distinction between the realm of Platonic ideals and the realm of human practice. (A different approach, with which I am only indirectly familiar, is suggested by the work of Ronald Dworkin and Allen Buchanan, which argues that our ideals themselves should be made more "non-ideal," that is, more "feasible," more practically achievable).

II.

What does it mean to import Rawls's distinction between two parts of a theory of justice into thinking about the philosophy of education? Here I want to discuss several specific examples, and then try to generalize some points for you to consider.

Let's start with the classic element from philosophy of education: the ideal of the educated person (which was still, when I started graduate school, being called generically "the educated man"—how long ago that seems now). There are many different versions of this ideal, but they are similar in identifying and justifying analytically the criteria that constitute what it means to be "educated." Unlike the tradition of *Bildung*, which focuses on the

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[7] Laura Valentini, "Ideal vs. Non-ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map," *Philosophy Compass* 7, no. 9 (2012): 654.

[8] Rawls, *Law of Peoples*, 89.

formation of a certain type of *person*, the analytical account is focused on illuminating the nature of *education* itself: mastery of a certain body of knowledge, the formation of certain skills and dispositions of thought, a certain breadth of vision beyond the parochial, intellectual autonomy, and, on some views, becoming more *rational.*

No sooner was this ideal articulated, in varied forms, by R. S. Peters and others, than it was lambasted as biased sexually, racially, ethnically, by social class, and by national status. The ideal of the educated person was rejected as simply the imposition of a certain bourgeois, masculine, white, European modernist way of being and knowing on other groups to whom these values are foreign—and as such, limiting their abilities ever to earn the status of "being educated." In my own view, many of those specific critiques have substance.

But then we are returned to the question of whether *any* ideal of an "educated person" must suffer such a fate; is there something about the formulation itself that is dubious? The endeavor of seeking such an ideal seems inherent to the humanist tradition itself: What makes us human? What differentiates us from other species? What makes being human special? As I mentioned in passing, the *Bildung* tradition arises from this same impulse. And it does appear self-evident to me that any activity of intentionally trying to teach another—as parent, teacher, mentor, or any similar role—takes for granted, at least implicitly, some set of normative assumptions of what it is good for them to become.

Here the ideal/non-ideal theory distinction might prove beneficial. On the Rawlsian type of account, the ideal of an educated person is a kind of target or end-state to which one aspires: individuals may fail to achieve that ideal, but the process of education is one of closer and closer approximation to it. On the modified view I am proposing here, an ideal functions only as a kind of heuristic: a framework for thinking, judging, planning, and acting in the real world of practice. Certain kinds of framework are generative, others are hegemonic and inhibitive—*that* is how they function as ideals and that is what allows us to evaluate them. The right kind of ideal theory enables the development of fruitful non-ideal theories that help us cope with the world we live in; the wrong kind restricts them.

"Fruitful" here means *both* helpful in guiding our thinking and practical choices in actual situations that concern us (like whether we ought to require students to read a particular book), as well as helpful in allowing us to clarify, better understand—and sometimes modify—the ideal itself. This two-sided, what I will call "binocular," perspective is crucial to my view: ideals, in practice, should help us not only by guiding action, but also in creating occasions for reflecting on those ideals. Non-ideal theory grows out of this process, *not* as a gradual approximation of the ideal, but as a series of reflections on why it is an ideal and why it is never possible to fully achieve it.

And I might add that no context exemplifies this dynamic quite as clearly as education, in which critical reflection and thought about the end-goals also *is* part of those end-goals.

Now, none of what I have said here tells us exactly what should be in this reformulated conception of the "educated person." But I think you can see the kinds of things that might qualify: broad dispositions and aspects of character that can be enacted differently given varied national, cultural and other contexts; more "knowing how" than "knowing that"; elements of empathy, "emotional intelligence," or caring that go more toward the kinds of formative relationships one creates and maintains, and through which one learns and grows, and not only mastery of a body of knowledge or a repertoire of cognitive skills.

Perhaps the most important element is the willingness and capacity to continually question the horizons of one's own education, what it comprises and what it lacks.

I will bet that some of you have already jumped to the critique: well, yes, but isn't all of *that* nationally or culturally biased too? What about upbringings that value unquestioned acceptance of transmitted truths, the presumed superiority of one set of beliefs and values over all others, the unswerving deference to certain sorts of intellectual or spiritual authority, and so on?

In short, should we just be educational relativists?

To that I might say that "educational relativism" is a contradiction in terms. For myself, I am willing to accept the criticism of cultural imperialism to the extent that I value the "willingness and capacity to continually question the horizons of one's own education, what it comprises and what it lacks." Everything is up for debate, of course, but I don't quite see what kind of debate one can have with someone who questions *that*.

III.

My second example grows out of some of my own work on dialogue. After my early work, and partly because of criticisms of it from Elizabeth Ellsworth, Alison Jones, and others, I became suspicious of what I came to see as a *prescriptive* model of dialogue: an ideal speech act that conformed to certain rules and standards, and which was presumed to be educationally beneficial so long as it conformed to those rules and standards.[9] Ellsworth and

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[9] Elizabeth Ellsworth, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy," *Harvard Educational Review* 59, no. 3 (1989): 297–324, and *Teaching Positions: Difference, Pedagogy, and the Power of Address* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997); Alison Jones, "The Limits of Cross-Cultural Dialogue: Pedagogy, Desire, and Absolution in the Classroom," *Educational Theory* 49, no. 3 (1999): 299–315, and "Talking Cure: The Desire for Dialogue" in *Democratic Dialogue in Education: Troubling Speech, Disturbing Silence*, ed. Megan Boler (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 57–67.

Jones analyzed how differently that speech context was experienced by diverse others; that what looked like an open, respectful, welcoming dialogical relation was for many alienating, intimidating, and silencing. For Alison Jones especially, it was crucial that people be able to opt out of those speech situations and withdraw into ones that were more familiar, more culturally homogeneous, more safe. The very ideal of cross-cultural dialogue, which seems so intrinsically valuable for education (even if it is sometimes difficult, even dangerous) was here rejected as inevitably asymmetrical between dominant and marginalized groups: Who is trying to understand whom? Why should I spend my time explaining myself, or my group, to you? Or to quote Ellsworth's title, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering?"

This is another instance in which the ideal/non-ideal theory distinction might help. In the case of dialogue, much of the literature, including parts of what I have written myself, idealize the form of dialogue and its educational value. If we could just have more dialogue, we could have more egalitarian classrooms! If we just had more dialogue there could be more cross-cultural understanding! If we just had more dialogue, teachers could learn from students as well as vice versa!

Investing a communicative ideal with this sort of potential is indeed dubious. Dialogues can be a medium of manipulation (something else we see in Plato's dialogues, but which is rarely talked about). Dialogues privilege certain ways of speaking—in fact, privilege *speaking*—in ways that exclude certain individuals and groups or leave them in silence. Dialogues can be competitive and aggressive in ways that belie their apparently cooperative ethos. Dialogues can easily become lectures in disguise. And so on. So a non-ideal theory of dialogue would have to look at the ideal in real contexts of practice, and theorize how to exploit the educational potential of dialogue in full awareness of its downsides.

The ideal theory of dialogue, to follow my line of thinking here, is not a model to which we aspire so much as a set of concepts and principles we invoke in thinking through the situated, actual speech situations in which we find ourselves. The aim is not to try to achieve the ideal speech situation—as I have suggested, the consequence may be the other way around, questioning and revising the ideal in light of the practical.

Some of this analysis, if I might say it, is already present in my earlier work on dialogue (some of it co-authored with Suzanne Rice).[10] I make clear

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[10] Nicholas C. Burbules and Suzanne Rice, "Dialogue Across Differences: Continuing the Conversation," *Harvard Educational Review* 61, no. 4 (1991): 393–416; Burbules, *Dialogue in Teaching: Theory and Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993). More recently, see Burbules, "The Limits of Dialogue as a Critical Pedagogy" in *Revolutionary Pedagogies: Cultural Politics, Education, and the Discourse of Theory*, ed. Peter Trifonas (New York: Routledge, 2000), 251–73, and "Dialogue and Critical Pedagogy" in *Critical Theory and Critical Pedagogy Today: Toward a New Critical*

that dialogue is not a single form of pedagogical communicative relation, but at least four different types, with different rules and different uses in educational contexts. Rice and I make clear that dialogue, in practice, can have a range of outcomes, not always leading toward consensus and understanding, but in fact sometimes producing a heightened sense of our differences. The idealization of dialogue itself can have counterproductive effects, as our critics have pointed out, by suggesting that there is One Right Way to engage in dialogue, and that those who cannot, will not, or are afraid to engage in that way are somehow to blame for violating its rules.

A non-ideal conception of dialogue provides a corrective to such idealizations, and raises our sensitivities to how they are experienced and felt by real people in real situations. This discussion also show that the ideal/non-ideal distinction arises not only in the context of liberal theories, like Rawls, but also in ostensibly "progressive" or "critical" ideals as well. For example, the classic socialist ideal, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need," sounds good until you think about how (and whether) it actually could work.

IV.

Another example of this theoretical shift arose in a debate I had with Harvey Siegel about *rationality* and *reasonableness*.[11] Rationality, for Siegel, is the focal point of what it means to be an educated person—not the entirety of what it means to be educated, but an essential part of it. In response, I pressed a different way of thinking about the problem.

Rationality, for Siegel, is an ideal concept, a species of what he calls "absolutism":

> If absolute standards are understood as regulative and prescriptive, then actual scientific practice and argument can indeed be assessed by appeal to and comparison with absolute standards. . . . Thus any account of rationality which is not absolutist at least in the sense of having regulative standards of merit is doomed, not to irrelevance, but to impotence—this minimal sort of absolutism is necessary if evaluation is to be even possible.[12]

Language in Education, ed. Ilan Gur-Ze'ev (Haifa, Israel: University of Haifa Press, 2005), 193–207.

[11] Nicholas C. Burbules, "Rationality and Reasonableness: A Discussion of Harvey Siegel's *Relativism Refuted* and *Educating Reason*," *Educational Theory* 41, no. 2 (1991): 235–52.

[12] Harvey Siegel, "Truth, Problem Solving and the Rationality of Science," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A* 14, no. 2 (1983): 97.

This seems a pretty clear instance of an ideal theory, an absolute standard to which we aspire. No one is perfectly rational, of course, but we judge our degree of rationality by how closely we approximate the ideal.

Instead, I suggested the normative concept of reasonableness:

Rationality is a substantive achievement; it takes shape in the activities, decisions, and judgments of persons who possess the skills and formal knowledge of rationality, but who apply these in real contexts of belief and action. It involves making choices about how and when to apply these principles, and when to refrain from applying them. . . . While there are some general standards of good reasoning, there is an unavoidable judging component as well, and hence an inherent personal, idiosyncratic, and indeterminate character to what it will mean to be rational (I would say "reasonable") for any particular person in any particular circumstance. Women may be reasonable in different ways from men; what is perfectly reasonable for a child may not be reasonable for an adult; and so on. . . . "Reasonableness" retains all the proper philosophical connotations, while being applicable to many ordinary-language contexts in which "rationality" is not: for example, during a heated argument, it seems much more helpful to ask one's partner to "be reasonable" than to ask him or her to "be rational"; conversely, many activities or decisions are better described as unreasonable than as irrational. . . . The conception of reasonableness I have been urging has some advantages here: first, because it includes judgments about when purely rational considerations are appropriate, and when they are not; and second, because it does not assume that the influence of reasons will affect every person in a given situation in exactly the same way. It is a fundamental mistake, I believe, to think that the weight of reasons determines specific choices in specific contexts of belief and action, so that any other choice must be seen as "irrational." Reasonableness involves weighing competing considerations, not all of them reasons, and hence is a matter of degree; some choices are more reasonable than others.[13]

I did not have the language of non-ideal theory when I wrote that piece, but I think you can see the parallels: an emphasis on situations and context, a focus on how general norms are interpreted and applied in practice, a degree of cultural flexibility in how and to what degree certain normative standards get interpreted and enacted, an aim toward not the approximation of an ideal but

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[13] Burbules, "Rationality and Reasonableness," 249–251.

toward reflection upon and the improvement of practice—and finally, where practice and the ideal clash, a critical focus on the potential shortcomings of the ideal, and not only practical failure to attain it. Sometimes being *too* rational is *un*reasonable.

A growing body of research shows that actual human thinking (sometimes termed "motivated reasoning") is highly susceptible to the selective filtering and evaluation of reasons.[14] What might look, in a purely formal sense, as a piece of counterevidence or a counterargument to a particular belief or value can be reframed, discredited, explained away, or simply ignored. Now, it is hardly news that people can be stubborn in their beliefs and reluctant to change them; but this research suggests that this pattern is quite widespread— more a normal aspect of human cognition than an aberration from good epistemic conduct. We are all—you and I—included in this category. Moreover the processes by which counterevidence or counterargument get discounted can be subtle. And so it is not so easy to simply judge people against a standard of "what a rational person should do." Rather, what reflection on phenomena like motivated reasoning suggests is that the enactment of reason is a complex, situated process, sometimes a matter of two steps forward, one step back, and not simply an approximation of an ideal. Issues like learning, improvement, reflecting on errors and trying to avoid them in the future, being open to correction from others, being more provisional and modest in our claims to truth, and so on, are more reliable, practical guides—in short, what I was calling being reasonable.

<div align="center">V.</div>

My final example comes from work I have done with a research group on the role of listening in education. One of the papers I did for that group was "On Pretending to Listen."[15] In it I explored the many varied circumstances in teaching, in parenting, and in social engagements generally where we pretend to listen, or at least intermittently pretend to listen (nodding our head, etc.) in the context of an ongoing communicative engagement. You can't always be fully and perfectly attuned to what others are saying: fatigue, distraction, a boring partner in conversation, and many other real-world factors can make it impossible to be that perfect ideal listener all the time. More to the point, pretending to listen is often just fine. Just because some people have to talk, and feel better for talking, doesn't mean they need to be (closely, attentively, constantly) listened to.

Now, of course there are many circumstances where it is not "just fine" to do this, and pretending to listen can turn out to be insulting or hurtful to

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[14] See, for example, Ziva Kunda, "The Case for Motivated Reasoning," *Psychological Bulletin* 108, no. 3 (1990): 480–98.

[15] Nicholas C. Burbules and Suzanne Rice, "On Pretending to Listen," *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 11 (2010): 2874–88. This paper was also developed with the assistance of Suzanne Rice.

others. I am not trying to romanticize "pretending," in this context or others—but to explore the nuances of pretending, which is not always false, deceptive, or dishonest. Sometimes we try, but fail. Sometimes, I suggest in that essay, we "coast" for a while in the context of what overall *is* careful listening. Sometimes we "fake it until we make it," acting a certain way *in order* to explore and cultivate that capacity "for real." Pretending, I argue, is part of a continuum of action that includes not pretending, in varying mixes and degrees; it is not part of a simple dyad, "pretending" vs. "authenticity." It's much more complicated than that.

This discussion, in turn, leads me in that essay to explore the idea of an ethics of "good enough." Given the human circumstances of limited time, limited energy, limited attention, limited patience, and so on, how do we think seriously about the ethical compromises we make, not out of a lack of desire to be and do good, but out of an honest recognition of our own limitations and imperfections? Is the aim of ethical conduct (this will sound familiar now) to approximate ever closer and closer to a set of ethical ideals? Is it mere hypocrisy, or laziness, to allow some leeway for what it is *possible* to do, given the circumstances? I think that ethics would be truer, and more useful, if it depended less on ideal theory and more on the non-ideal qualities of disposition and character that animate our ethical impulses and choices—but always *our* impulses and choices, in real situations, not some imaginary agent in a hypothetical thought experiment about what is the right thing to do if X encounters Y under circumstances Z.

VI.

In conclusion, let me try to draw some of these varied themes together. Broadly speaking, this discussion is about the distinction between Platonic and Pragmatic approaches to philosophy (the latter may or may not overlap with Pragmatism as a philosophical school of thought; I have in mind more "pragmatism" as a general attitude toward life). For philosophy of education generally, it means focusing more on the concrete and situated contexts in which decisions about belief and action take place, decisions made by actual people with human qualities and strengths and shortcomings, in human relationships that sometimes support and sometimes interfere with the edicts of ideal thought and action.

But my central point here is about something more than just the recognition that life is imperfect. The relation of ideal to non-ideal theory, as I am trying to talk about it here, is also about rethinking, and sometimes challenging, aspects of ideal theories when they put us out of touch with contexts of actual practice. Our ideals provide concepts and principles that should inform human judgment and action, not models that we should try to emulate. I tend to think there is nowhere this is more true than in the case of education, and obviously that is where my examples come from. But the point is, I think, more general than just about philosophy of education.

What I am describing here is what I called a "binocular" view: being able to keep in sight both the ideals that guide us *and* the particularities of a situation that resist or belie those ideals.[16] We don't give ourselves up merely to a kind of situational opportunism, or even worse to the vulgarities of "whatever works." Our ideals don't become irrelevant. But at the same time we recognize that our ideal theories are not utopian roadmaps; they are heuristics that gain purchase and meaning as they are applied, and which inevitably need to be rethought and reinterpreted *as* they are applied.

But there is a final aspect of this binocular perspective, which at the start of my career I called a sense of the "tragic."[17] It is in keeping both perspectives simultaneously in view—what could have been, and what is—that we recognize and accept the gap between our aspirations and our accomplishments. We can deceive ourselves by closing one eye or the other: by dreaming about golden possibilities that reaffirm our better natures, or on the other hand by escaping into a utilitarianism unfettered by reflections on larger meaning and value. Either is a kind of dishonesty and self-deception, but to live and act conscientiously with both in mind is to accept a certain instability of thought and action. There is a *feeling* to this, and not just a philosophical attitude. In that early essay I say that this is an especially difficult attitude for educators, since we believe so deeply in growth and improvement. But what I have come to learn is that as our abilities and achievements grow, so too does our awareness of what we have not achieved, or what we could have done better: the ideal recedes as we approach it. And so we live within the non-ideal as best we can.

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[16] Nicholas C. Burbules, "2001: A Philosophical Odyssey," in *Philosophy of Education 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002), 1–14.

[17] Nicholas C. Burbules, "The Tragic Sense of Education," *Teachers College Record* 91, no. 4 (1990): 469–479.