

It's (Still) All in Our Heads: Non-ideal Theory as Grounded Reflective Equilibrium

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Alison Jaggar offers an amazingly ambitious project for reforming the methods, content, and conclusions of philosophical inquiry. As I understand the project, which she is undertaking in collaboration with Theresa W. Tobin, she proposes four significant moves.¹ (I should note that this is my analytic construction, not hers.) First, she wants to redirect epistemology of moral justification from idealized and universal epistemological frames to ones that are non-ideal, naturalized, and contextually situated. Second, based on her commitment to naturalized and situated moral epistemology, she proposes a methodological innovation: namely, to do case studies of “reasoning toward justification” in order to identify “models of reasoning that actually work.” These case studies are intended, in turn, to reveal generalizable, but not universalizable, methods for moral reasoning that can be applied in appropriately specific, situated, non-ideal contexts.

Third, Jaggar wants to redirect both the epistemological methods and normative substance of philosophical inquiry to focus on diversity and inequality in power relations. Methodologically, every justificatory reasoning process should be subjected to power analyses, to ensure that inequalities are not replicated or even reified — no matter how subtly — in the reason-giving and reason-accepting process. Substantively, philosophers should be reasoning in collaboration with others *about* real-life cases of power inequities in diverse contexts. This will ensure that power, inequality, and diversity are made central to philosophical methodology and normative substance. Finally, fourth, these methods and objects of inquiry are intended to lead to the construction of “realistic utopias”: “fairly comprehensive or systemic models of better societies” that help people develop “ideals that are realistic in the senses of being contextually relevant, morally adequate, and practically feasible.” These realistic utopias, ultimately, are Jaggar’s “theory of change,” to borrow terminology from the worlds of policy analysis and organizations. They may, she maintains, “be helpful in designing just educational institutions for real-world situations.”

This account of philosophy’s justificatory purposes, methods, and content stands in stark contrast to both ideal and non-ideal theory. Jaggar explains clearly why she is skeptical about the usefulness of theory that is ideal all the way down: that is, of theory that presumes fully compliant participants in a fully just system that is constructed (often inside a single philosopher’s head) so as to include no recognized historical, social, cultural, or other injustices. As many other non-ideal theorists argue as well, there are good reasons to take into account more realistic understandings of human nature in all its frailty; to pay attention to pervasive inequalities and injustices that are baked into contemporary social and political institutions; and to bring in multiple perspectives about these experiences that may broaden the understandings of privileged, Western, often male, often white professional philosophers.

But Jagggar goes further than many non-ideal theorists by implicitly turning these critiques of ideal theory upon non-ideal theory itself. Many non-ideal theorists look at the world as it is in order to identify problems of justice, ethics, or morality. But they then theorize about these problems from the philosopher's armchair, perhaps informed by a foray into JSTOR for some empirical social science insights. Non-ideal theory that proceeds this way starts with a real-world, perhaps historically and socially contextualized problem, and then asks questions such as: What would *theorist X* say about this problem? What would *Y principle* demand? Why is this situation wrong, in light of *conceptions A and B*, and what would ideally happen instead? I think that Jagggar would agree that such theorizing may provide some useful guidance about designing just institutions for real-world situations. But she also implies — and I agree with her on this — that this approach risks retreating far too quickly into “ideal reasoning” or “idealizing methods ... for justifying normative claims.” By focusing on applying ideal theories to non-ideal cases, engaging in idealized and non-situated methods of reasoning, and/or drawing conclusions that themselves are entirely idealized, non-ideal theorists potentially undercut their capacities to be truly action-guiding. Jagggar suggests this line of critique in raising questions about her own earlier scholarship that sought to eliminate gender and class.² She also critiques reasoning about how to get from a non-ideal “here” to an idealized “there” as utopian and unrealistic because it neither includes nor responds to the perspectives of those who are most enmeshed in the real-world situation.

By contrast, I take it that Jagggar's argument is that truly non-ideal, or naturalized, moral epistemologies leave both the armchair and the theory behind. Non-ideal philosophers ask instead: What do the participants in this contested situation say? To whom do they say it, how, and why? What kinds of counterclaims, from whom, delivered in what way, do the participants seem to recognize as legitimate, and how do they indicate this? How did this problem come to be? What is its history? How does this history, and this social account of the problem, interact with other histories, sociologies, and cultural constructions? How do different participants characterize the problem and its history? How do they describe its nature, identify what values are involved, or map the landscape of potential moral solutions? Finally, given all of this, what kind of “plausible, usable, power sensitive, and ... feasible”³ solution — what kind of realistic utopia — can be constructed toward which all members of the moral community might strive?

I am a huge fan of these kinds of questions. I think that such approaches broaden philosophers' moral understanding in a number of ways. Non-ideal theorists will describe problems more completely, construct more accurate and compelling thick moral accounts, achieve better understandings of what is at stake for whom, and gain new insights about not only the problem under investigation but about moral concepts and conundrums more broadly, if we systematically engage in such questioning.

Nonetheless, I remain perplexed by Jagggar's central epistemological and methodological claims about these inquiry practices. First, I don't fully understand how these kinds of questions lead to a truly novel philosophical epistemology. I'm confused about what “reasoning toward justification” means outside of a fairly

standard philosophical account of reason-giving. To the extent that Jaggar is proposing an exercise still in *normative philosophy*, rather than an out-and-out shift to anthropology, cultural sociology, or the like, it seems to me that the ideas philosophers encounter in engaging with the “other” must ultimately enter philosophers’ own heads. In other words, if historical and interpretive empirical research serves as a source of ideas about moral justification, but not as fixed claims immune to challenge, then how can (and should) moral epistemology ever be fully naturalized? Second, I am perplexed by why the methodological process of reason-seeking and reason-giving that Jaggar proposes must or even should lead to the construction of realistic utopias. Nor am I convinced that the construction of realistic utopias is actually a desirable or meaningful aim for non-ideal theory. Instead, I suggest that non-ideal theory would do better to use naturalized epistemologies to identify and explore novel moral concepts and conceptions, to propose nonutopian approaches to mitigate lived injustice, and even to construct fully idealized normative theories about moral phenomena and questions made visible by situated inquiry into non-ideal circumstances. These all seem like more useful contributions by non-ideal theory than the construction of realistic utopias.

NATURALIZED REASONING TOWARD JUSTIFICATION

In her essay, Jaggar names five features of naturalized “reasoning toward justification.”²⁴ Such reasoning should be (1) intersubjective; (2) empirical, not hypothetical; (3) inclusive and fitted to specific contexts, meaning both that naturalized reasoning may vary by context, and that within any one context, the reasons given should be “‘followable’ by everyone involved”; (4) constructed collaboratively with and informed by multiple disciplines, as well as by moral reasoners who are not academics; and (5) reflexive, to keep philosophers humble.

I’m sympathetic to the motivations underlying each of these features, as I am to the motivations underlying Jaggar and Tobin’s project as a whole. But I also question how these qualities are identified with or achieved entirely within a “naturalized” framework. As Jaggar acknowledges, every (interesting) empirical example of reasoning features imbalances of power and privilege. Every possible example of moral reasoning also excludes some legitimate claimants and/or is biased in some practical way. There are no uncompromised communities of reasoners. This means that philosophers must make some non-naturalized judgments about what kinds of reasons are acceptable, from whom, and under what conditions. For example, what does an inclusive and intersubjective form of mutually intelligible moral reasoning look like in empirical practice? Do we reason with racists or misogynists? Do we reason with people so oppressed by current states of affairs that any utopia seems unrealistic, even cruel to contemplate? How about those so privileged by current states of affairs that they view radical change as a declaration of war against cherished ways of life? It seems that any metaphilosophical account of methods needs an account of who is part of the intersubjective community — one that goes beyond what solely naturalistic accounts can provide.

This is why even if naturalized or non-ideal theory rightly leads philosophers to seek reasons from a more diverse set of interlocutors engaging in more varied forms

of moral justification than they usually pay attention to, this doesn't represent an alternative moral epistemology. The *process* of seeking knowledge is different. But the *criteria* for what counts as knowledge, as reasonable moral justification, seem to remain the same. Consider Jaggar's insistence, building on Onora O'Neill, that reasons should be "followable" by participants in the justification process.⁵ This presumably cannot mean that reason-giving is justified only when the other side is convinced; that would be far too demanding. If, on the other hand, justification is taken to be legitimate so long as the reasons are merely understandable by others, then I fail to see how this project is truly empirical, inclusive, and "followable."

An alternative way of exploring this same question is by asking whether naturalized moral epistemological methods produce insights that can ultimately be mastered and conveyed by one philosopher, or whether knowledge will *always* be dispersed among multiple interlocutors. If knowledge is always dispersed, then intersubjective moral reasoning certainly has a distinctive naturalized epistemology, but it also fails as a form of moral reasoning. Ultimately, reasons must become shared for the project of justification to succeed. If, on the other hand, the relevant reasons are in the end accessible to a single philosopher, then Jaggar's *process* of coming-to-know may be naturalized, but her *knowing* is not epistemologically distinctive. Naturalized reasoning provides an effective and efficient way for philosophers to achieve insights that they are unlikely to achieve while nestled in their armchairs. But the final epistemological grounding of reasons accessed in the field and reasons accessed from one's armchair is the same.

Given this, I question whether these five features are even particular to naturalized approaches to moral justification. For example, it presumably is not the case that *only* those working collaboratively to develop new models of justification must be reflective, or even that these philosophers should be more reflexive than others. Presumably, all non-ideal theorists, and even ideal theorists who want to get things right by checking their own intuitions against others' judgments, should also engage in reflexive theorizing. Similarly, it seems that all moral theories will be strengthened by inclusive attempts to understand and, if appropriate, integrate novel perspectives, as well as to attend to forms of justification that aren't immediately familiar but can be understood over time.

Arguably, this is a strength of Jaggar's arguments in favor of getting philosophers out of their armchairs, into the field, and into reflexive, thickly moral, interdisciplinarily-informed conversations, ceremonies, or storytelling and testimony-giving sessions with diverse others. Jaggar's methods needn't be limited to a small class of intrepid, "muddy boots" philosophers. Rather, many philosophers could benefit from such engagement, ideal and non-ideal alike. Perhaps this is because such engagement could be understood as an exercise in what I suggest we call "grounded reflective equilibrium" (an analogue, perhaps, to grounded theory in social sciences).⁶ To the extent that this is an accurate characterization of naturalist philosophical methods, it reinforces my judgment that they are epistemologically continuous with other normative philosophical approaches — even if grounded reflective equilibrium is far more open to intersubjective and empirical ways of knowing than John Rawls ever dreamed.

WHY REALISTIC UTOPIAS?

Although I question some of the epistemological claims that Jaggard makes about naturalized reasoning toward justification, I ultimately embrace most of the practices that she advances. This is not true for her claim that philosophy should aim to produce “realistic utopias.”

First, I am simply confused by the relationship between naturalistic moral epistemology and the construction of realistic utopias. Is naturalistic moral epistemology particularly *well-suited* to designing realistic utopias? Is it *necessary* for designing them? Is it *confined* to designing them? I don’t see why the answer to any of these questions is “yes.” For example, I could imagine theorists using Jaggard’s methods investigating specific problems and drawing conclusions that are utterly nonutopian: how to strike the right balance between the needs of disabled and nondisabled children in allocating educational funding in Florida, say, or whether teachers in Seattle should accommodate parents’ or students’ demands to boycott high-stakes standardized tests, and on what grounds. These kinds of questions are important, appropriately informed by naturalized inquiry, and deeply bound up with issues of diversity and inequality. But they have little to do with utopia construction, realistic or otherwise.⁷

Second, I don’t know how one decides what is “realistic” or “utopian.” Philosophers always stipulate a bunch of assumptions, and then try to prove an argument that is consonant with, but extends beyond, what has been stipulated. But what are Jaggard’s criteria for what is to be stipulated and what is to be taken as open for contestation or change? In my book *No Citizen Left Behind*, I stipulated the persistence of de facto segregated schools serving low-income children of color, and then made arguments about what kind of civic education would help empower youth in that context.⁸ A few critics objected to my acceptance of school segregation; they wanted me to fight back and work toward school integration. On their reading, my “realism” was a handmaiden to acquiescent complicity. Other critics, however, were concerned that my proposed reforms were way *too* ambitious given the current political climate; they feared I marginalized myself by even advocating for them. So how do we establish what is realistic and what is merely utopian?

This question takes us back to what role philosophy plays in Jaggard’s theory of change. One reason to seek the construction of realistic *utopias* is that anything less is likely to be too mired within the status quo. One reason to seek the construction of *realistic* utopias is that anything more is not credible: there’s no possible way to get from here to there. So it is important to identify this sweet spot. But there’s little reason to think that *philosophy* is the right tool for this job. Policy studies, sociology, psychology, even neurobiology seem more likely to identify the “just right” spot to move society forward. This is not obviously a task for normative philosophy.

WHAT NATURALIST NON-IDEAL NORMATIVE PHILOSOPHY CAN DO

Instead, I believe that non-ideal theory can more productively use naturalized epistemologies (1) to identify and explore novel moral concepts, (2) to construct idealized normative theories about these moral phenomena made visible by situated inquiry, and (3) to propose nonutopian approaches to mitigate injustice.

In researching Boston Public School's revised school assignment plan, for example, I became fascinated by what I call the "ethics of pandering."⁹ This is the ethics of reinforcing existing, unjust inequalities on the grounds that doing so has positive knock-on effects for everyone, including the least advantaged. I came to think about this problem because middle-class families preemptively flee the Boston Public Schools if they believe their children are likely to be assigned to a low-quality school. Since socioeconomic integration is the most reliable way to scale quality in urban schools, it is to everyone's benefit to draw middle-class families into the system. But the only way to keep advantaged families in the system is to give them inequitably higher chances to access high quality schools — which is exactly what Boston's revised school assignment system does.

I don't think that the ethics of pandering is epistemologically distinct from other ethical concepts; in fact, one of its virtues is that it is quickly comprehensible even to people who know nothing about Boston, education policy, or even philosophy. Similarly, it could have been first developed by an armchair philosopher — although it was perhaps more likely that I would stumble on the concept via non-ideal case study research. Nonetheless, this exercise in non-ideal, naturalized theory now enables some ideal theorizing about the general normative parameters for pandering under conditions of antecedent injustice. How should consequentialist considerations about mutual advantage or the difference principle, for example, be weighed against deontological considerations about civic respect? Finally, this exercise in grounded reflective equilibrium may help mitigate present-day injustice. I don't really care what a "realistic utopia" might be for Boston's school assignment plan, because that's not the plan in existence. But I do think we might be able to nudge current policies in a slightly more just direction by proposing some "leveling up" approaches that increase low-income families' opportunities to access quality schools without obviously threatening middle-class families' privileged access.¹⁰

In sum, I do believe that Jaggar has identified important and compelling new approaches to engaging in non-ideal philosophical inquiry and normative justification. I question whether her methodology truly rests on new epistemological grounds, and I am especially skeptical that the construction of realistic utopias is either a necessary or a desirable aim of naturalized moral reasoning. But I do think her work has a tremendous amount to offer in shifting philosophers out of their armchairs, into the field, and ultimately into a form of grounded reflective equilibrium that can generate both theoretical innovation and the mitigation of lived injustice.

1. I should note that in setting out Jaggar's argument, I am drawing heavily on her two recent papers in *Metaphilosophy*, since this essay, the published version of her Kneller Lecture, is one piece of this larger project. See Alison M. Jaggar and Theresa W. Tobin, "Situating Moral Justification: Rethinking the Mission of Moral Epistemology," *Metaphilosophy* 44, no. 4 (2013): 383–408; and Theresa W. Tobin and Alison M. Jaggar, "Naturalizing Moral Justification: Rethinking the Method of Moral Epistemology," *Metaphilosophy* 44, no. 4 (2013): 409–439. Since this is a response specifically to the Kneller Lecture, however, I confine my critique to the arguments she makes in this piece.

2. Alison M. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1983).

3. Tobin and Jaggar, "Naturalizing Moral Justification: Rethinking the Method of Moral Epistemology," 414.

4. I have to admit that I'm not exactly sure what "justification" itself means. It seems to be a combination of "constructing," "convincing others of," or "proving," and also possibly "revising one's own" binding moral claims. I'm curious about whether some or all of this is right; Jaggard's own use of the term seems to shift slightly in different sections of her argument.

5. Here, Jaggard draws on Onora O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue: A Constructive Account of Practical Reasoning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

6. I am grateful to Harry Brighouse for pointing out to me that my own normative case study research is partly an exercise in reflective equilibrium.

7. It's worth noting that I am not addressing myself to Erik Olin Wright's conception of *Envisioning Real Utopias* (New York: Verso, 2010), since Jaggard's account of "realistic utopias" seems independent of Wright's conceptual project.

8. Meira Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

9. Meira Levinson, "The Ethics of Pandering in Boston Public Schools' School Assignment Plan," *Theory and Research in Education* 13, no. 1 (2015): 38–55.

10. Examples of how philosophers, empirical researchers, and educational policymakers have used this naturalized case study to develop both ideal and non-ideal theory, as well as educational policy and practice recommendations, can be found in chapter 5 of Meira Levinson and Jacob Fay, eds., *Dilemmas of Educational Ethics: Cases and Commentaries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).