

## On the Nature and Scope of Morality\*

By: [Terrance McConnell](#)

[McConnell, Terrance](#). "On the Nature and Scope of Morality," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54(2) (June 1994), pp. 421-425.

Made available courtesy of Wiley-Blackwell <http://www.wiley.com/>

The definitive version is available at [www3.interscience.wiley.com](http://www3.interscience.wiley.com)

**\*\*\*Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from Wiley-Blackwell. This version of the document is not the version of record. Figures and/or pictures may be missing from this format of the document.\*\*\***

### **Article:**

*The Validity of Values* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), the second volume of Nicholas Rescher's trilogy, *A System of Pragmatic Idealism*, is a wide-ranging and intriguing book. Professor Rescher covers many fundamental issues in ethical theory and does so in a way that engages the reader. Topics discussed include the rationality of values, a defense of moral objectivity against both subjectivism and relativism, the relationship of facts and values, the nature of personhood, the meaning of life, optimism and pessimism, and an answer to the question, "Why be moral?" One cannot do justice to the breadth of this work in such a short essay. Here I shall focus on what Rescher has to say about the nature of morality and the role ideals ought to play in the moral life. I have selected these issues because of my own interest and their inherent difficulty.

Let us begin with Rescher's account of the nature of morality. Morality is characterized as "an end-governed rational enterprise," one whose "object is to equip people with a body of norms (rules and values) that make for peaceful and collectively satisfying coexistence by facilitating their living together and interacting in a way that is productive for the realization of the 'general benefit'" (176). Morality's function is to safeguard the real interests of people (180).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it is said to be true by definition that morality is "geared to the interests of people" (182) and that an act correctly described as "willfully causing needless suffering to a person" is also "(morally) wrong" (178). What makes an act right or wrong is whether doing it protects or injures the interests of agents (185).

Rescher denies that this is an idiosyncratic or culturally relative conception of morality; he claims to have described the very concept of morality. The basic principles of any society with a morality are universal and absolute (190); their aim is to safeguard and promote the real interests of persons. This does not mean, however, that the more specific rules and concrete moral judgments must be the same in every society. Morality is context-dependent and allows for "situational variation and pluralism" (189). The same principles applied in different situations yield different concrete prescriptions. The fundamental aim of morality is to protect and promote the interests of people, and this generates rules such as "Do not steal" and "Do not cheat." But these rules must be understood within a social context. Thus, the prohibition against stealing can only be understood when one has a proper understanding of ownership, and that can vary from society to society (193).

There is a limit to the sort of variability that morality allows, however. A society that has implemented practices fundamentally injurious to people either has an inadequate conception of morality or none at all (188). Examples of such practices include suttee and the sacrifice of firstborn female children (188, 182). Unless some extraordinary story can be told that links such practices with the protection of people's interests—e.g., members believe that it is necessary to prevent some evil demon from wreaking havoc on the community—one must conclude that at best the society has an inadequate conception of morality.

Rescher is surely correct to argue that morality is conceptually linked to the support of interests and that this generates proscriptions against the infliction of needless pain and the promotion of anguish for one's own amusement (190). One must wonder, though, whether this account of the nature of morality is too broad. Rescher is aware of this potential problem, for he says that the sort of story just sketched "holds not just for morality but for any inherently goal-oriented human project" (194; see also, 250-51). Medicine, for example, has as its essential aim health (195). This aim issues in general principles and rules, but how these are implemented will depend on situational variables. Again, this seems sensible. But one wonders if these characterizations may not render all medical decisions as moral ones.<sup>2</sup> Allow me to explain.

Morality is concerned to promote and protect the basic interests of people. Medicine's aim is health. Yet health is certainly a basic interest of people. Thus, one wonders if this renders all medical decisions as moral. Consider a specific example.<sup>3</sup> A female in her early 40s and in a high risk group for breast cancer has recently begun to have annual mammograms. The second such test reveals a potentially troublesome spot. The patient's physician recommends a lumpectomy, though the patient is assured that the odds are good that the tiny cyst is not malignant. The patient contacts a surgeon and a growth measuring ten millimeters is removed. A consultation is held when the laboratory work is completed, and the surgeon, Dr. A, reports that the growth is malignant and recommends a modified radical mastectomy. He acknowledges, however, that he is very cautious and prefers to err on the side of safety, and so he urges the patient to get a second opinion. She goes to Dr. B, who is flabbergasted at Dr. A's recommendation. She says that the lumpectomy alone is sufficient (to be followed by careful monitoring). Somewhat confused, the patient seeks a third opinion. Dr. C advises that the lumpectomy be supplemented with five weeks of radiation. Finally, the patient goes to a fourth physician, and Dr. D recommends a simple mastectomy.

There is a disagreement among the four physicians. Each, we may presume, recommends the option that he or she believes best promotes the patient's medical interests. Research suggests that the medical community is divided about what the best response to breast cancer of this sort is. Clearly the patient's interests are at stake here, and we are told that morality protects and promotes basic interests. Yet I should think that the disagreement among these physicians is medical but not moral. The end of medicine is health, and certainly that end does not always fall outside the realm of the moral; for agents are prohibited from doing things that adversely affect another's health. But not every decision affecting health is moral. Some may say that the decision in this case is medical, not moral, because only the patient's interests are affected. But that cannot distinguish the two realms, for a patient's medical decisions often affect many others, such as members of her family.

My point is not that there is no connection between morality and medicine. The opposite is true. Actions in *all* areas are *constrained* by morality. And some decisions in medical contexts are moral—e.g., deciding whether to breach the confidence of an HIV+ patient who refuses to inform his spouse and refuses to alter his sexual behavior. But I still maintain that some decisions are basically medical, and how best to respond to this patient's breast cancer is an example.

In this case, of course, the patient must decide for herself what to do. But even if the patient were incompetent and a guardian (or physician) had to make the decision for her, it still does not seem to be a moral decision. One might retort that the moral decision has already been made—to do what is best for the patient—and the disagreement is about the means to that end. But that does not mark off moral from nonmoral decisions. After all, one can also say in the case of the HIV+ patient that the parties have agreed that what ought to be done is that which best promotes the interests of all affected persons; they just disagree about which act achieves this. Yet this disagreement is moral.

Let us turn now to Rescher's discussion of ideals (Chapter 7). His overall normative theory says that rationality in general, and morality in particular, require one to do the best that one can (e.g., 12, 13, 16, 22, 39, 151, 205, 223, 235). But this theory of doing the best one can is not to be understood in terms of maximization, as advocated by utilitarians. For maximizing theories presuppose that the goods to be promoted are

commensurable, and Rescher argues that basic human goods are diverse, incommensurate, and irreducibly plural (27-29). He argues that "if value really were homogeneous, then rationality would indeed be a matter of maximization" (30). But instead the good "is multidimensional, not homogeneous" (33). Rationality does consist in selecting "the best option," but that is achieved by "the harmonization of a plurality of goods" (39). It is a matter of "optimization," not maximization (42-44). It is within this context that I want to place Rescher's discussion of ideals.

Ideals are values of a special sort. We attempt to shape the world in virtue of our ideals. They consolidate our commitment to moral excellence. Rescher tells us that supererogatory acts are above and beyond the call of duty, and that supererogation is "best conceived of not in terms of duty but in terms of dedication to an ideal" (129). Rescher's example of an ideal is "peace on earth." It sets a direction in which we strive, but "is not a goal we can expect to attain" (130). Though perfection cannot be attained, there is a pragmatic justification for the pursuit of ideals. Ideals are tested by their utility. The superiority of one ideal over another "must be tested by its practical consequences for human well-being" (132).<sup>4</sup> Even though ideals cannot be attained, benefits accrue from their pursuit (133). The justification of ideals is in their "capacity to energize and motivate human effort toward productive results" (134); they are "instrumental means, subservient to the ulterior values whose realization they facilitate" (136). Rescher characterizes ideals as fictions, as unrealizable ends. Yet the pursuit of ideals produces benefits. "Optimal results are often attainable only by trying for too much" (138).

Here I want to raise three questions about Rescher's discussion of ideals. First, if ideals are fictions (unattainable goals), can they be pursued *as fictions* and still be useful? Consider peace on earth. Can an agent's pursuit of this end really produce *optimally* beneficial results if the agent (correctly) believes that the end is unattainable? If not, must an agent fool himself in order to get the best outcome? Rescher tells us that often in order to obtain the best achievable results within our power, we must aim too high (135, 138). But if we are really *aiming*, then it seems that we are envisioning the thing aimed at as achievable. Within a system that portrays morality as a rational enterprise, it would be odd if agents had to fool themselves to obtain optimal benefits. But if agents need not fool themselves, it seems that they are not *aiming* for the ideal itself. I may realize that peace on earth is not achievable, but nevertheless work hard for peace in some small corner of the earth. So envisioned, that for which I am aiming is achievable. Am I bound to fall short if I am not aiming too high? In this regard, it is interesting that in his discussion of the meaning of life, Rescher tells us that one can make a *real* difference without making a big difference (143).

My second and third questions concern the moral status assigned to the pursuit of ideals. As noted earlier, Rescher seems to place the pursuit of ideals outside the realm of duty. Given the pragmatic justification for the pursuit of ideals just sketched, however, one must wonder if this activity should occupy a different place in Rescher's scheme. The reason is this. Morality's requirements are understood in terms of doing the best one can—in particular, striving for the optimization of incommensurable goods. But if *optimal* results are attainable only by adopting ideals and striving for that which is unattainable, then it would seem that one is *required* to adopt and pursue (selected) ideals. My second question, then, asks whether an ethic of ideals is really distinct from an ethic of duty.

My third question asks whether the pursuit of some rather admirable ideals might not be contrary to duty (when tested in terms of its practical consequences). Consider this example. Suppose that as a youth you (correctly) observed that the economically privileged frequently received favored treatment. When it concerned the distribution of benefits such as good grades, a role in a class play, or a spot on the Little League team, privileged status, not merit, was often the basis for selection. This stuck with you, and as a young adult you committed yourself to an ideal: the elimination of favored treatment for the privileged. This seems like an admirable ideal. But, to be realistic, it is doubtful that your pursuit of this ideal will produce the best results. The following seems all too plausible. You become involved in various youth activities. You preach and practice the importance of distributing (certain) goods on the basis of merit, not social status. You meet with resistance at every turn. Finally, after years in the trenches, you assess the situation and conclude (reasonably) that you have made very little difference, even in your little corner of the earth. Wealth and the motivation of parents to

promote the interests of their children are forces too powerful to overcome. Your level of frustration is high. You see few if any benefits that have resulted from your pursuit. Judged pragmatically, you seem to be a failure. Optimization of diverse human goods called for a different course of action. Yet your ideal still seems admirable.

The topics discussed here represent a small piece of what is covered in *The Validity of Values*, and the questions posed are best regarded as an invitation to address further these difficult issues.<sup>5</sup>

### Notes

\*This paper discusses volume II of the trilogy, *The Validity of Value*.

1. How nonrational animals are to be brought within the scope of morality is confined to a footnote (185).
2. And I take it a similar point can be made about other human enterprises, such as education, engineering, and the law.
3. The case sketched here is a slightly modified version of one faced recently by a member of my own family.
4. Rescher gives a similar argument for what he calls "attitudinal optimism" in Chapter 9 (especially 166).
5. I thank Michael J. Zimmerman for comments on an earlier version of this essay.