

By: [Terrance McConnell](#)

McConnell, T. (1989). Nicholas Rescher's *Ethical Idealism* (University of California Press, 1987) in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 49(4) (June), pp. 748- 752.

Made available courtesy of Wiley-Blackwell: The definitive version is available at <http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/>

**\*\*\*Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from the 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 purpose of this book is to examine "the nature and function of ideals" (p. 1). Its central thesis is that ideals are important because of their capacity to guide thought and action in beneficial directions, and that ideals "play a positive and productive role in human affairs" even when they are unrealistic or unachievable (p. 1).

Chapter I argues that it is not always irrational to aim at the unachievable. Rescher calls such goals "lost causes," and says that they may be unattainable in a strong sense. He gives as examples attempting to square the circle and the Quaker delegation's endeavor to dissuade the Nazis from persecuting Jews (p. 7). And, Rescher argues, it may be rational to pursue these lost causes even if the agent *knows* that their attainment is impossible (pp. 8-9). Of course, Rescher's claim is that pursuing unattainable goals is rational only under certain conditions, and this leads him to develop two rationales in support of the position.

The first rationale maintains that sometimes pursuing an impossible goal is demanded by other goals that are attainable (pp. 9-12). An example is that of a commander who sets out to win a hopeless battle in order to impress his superiors. By pursuing unattainable objectives, such as a perfectly efficient engine, valuable results may be attained. The natural response to this is that what the agent is really seeking are those side benefits. But Rescher argues that to attribute a switch in goals does not do justice to the agent's intentions. He cites the case of politicians who declare their candidacy for the presidency of the U. S. and make every effort to achieve it, though many do not expect to do so. Again, the natural response is that these people at least think that achieving the goal is possible, though improbable. Rescher rejects this, claiming that from the perspective of the agent and the observer "*there just is no further operative difference* between pursuing a goal whose probability of realization is seen as miniscule and pursuing a goal whose probability is seen as nil" (p. 12).

The second rationale claims that sometimes pursuing impossible goals enhances achievement (pp. 12-16). Rescher gives as examples an actor trying to make *every* member of the audience feel anger and the police chief trying to abolish corruption from his force. In neither case does the agent expect to achieve this goal, but only by so acting can he achieve the best results. One is tempted to say that the agent's real goal is maximal effectiveness; if an agent realizes that by "going for it all" he will get only 90 percent, then getting 90 percent is his real goal. But, Rescher argues, in such a case the person can achieve 90 percent only if his goal is 100 percent. Thus some impossible goals have redeeming side effects.

Chapter II argues that 'ought' does not imply 'can'. Rescher takes the existence of moral dilemmas to show this. A moral dilemma is a situation in which an agent ought to do each of two acts but cannot do both. If there are moral dilemmas, then one must deny either what Rescher calls the "Principle of Combination" [namely, if an agent ought to do each of two acts, then he ought to do both] or that 'ought' implies 'can'. Rescher argues that it is contrary to commonsense to deny either that there are moral dilemmas or that the Principle of Combination holds; therefore, 'ought' does not imply 'can'. The case against "'ought' implies 'can'" need not rest on moral

dilemmas, however. Rescher argues that what he calls a "moral problem" also casts doubt on the principle (pp. 34-37). For example, if X promised to do A but finds himself unable to do A because of circumstances beyond his control, it is still true that he ought to do A. As the principle that 'ought' implies 'can' is usually understood, it is equivalent to "incapacity removes obligation."

Rescher thinks that the principle is more plausible if it is understood to mean that incapacity negates blame for failure to carry out an obligation. The relevance of this to the main topic is that the "moral enterprise is fundamentally committed to the never fully achievable task of making a place for the ideal in the hostile environment of the world's realities" (p. 54).

The principal aim of Chapter III is to argue against construing rationality in terms of utility maximization. Rationality can be understood in terms of utility maximization only if all ends can be amalgamated into a single measurable good; but this cannot be done, Rescher argues. Taking the simple idea of the merits of a car, Rescher points out that maximum speed, starting reliability, operating reliability, safety, and economy are all merits of a car that cannot be reduced to a common denominator. There are, then, different ingredients of goodness, a plurality of good-making factors (p. 59). Because of incommensurability, utility maximization is not feasible and preferability is not transitive (pp. 64-70). Rescher's main point here is that the utilitarian view of rationality requires more than just quantification; utilitarians need measurability of the good (because utility is a measure of value), and that is not available. Instead, rational choice requires the harmonization of a plurality of sometimes conflicting goods. The role ideals play is to enable us to contemplate value conditions beyond the limits of the actual world; they serve as a goad to effort.

Chapter IV discusses optimism and pessimism. Rescher distinguishes three versions of optimism — what he calls "actuality optimism" (the view that all is right with the world), "tendency optimism" (the view that things are getting better), and "prospect optimism" (adopting the attitude that things are movable toward the better). Rescher discusses several questions that any sort of optimism must address and distinguishes different versions of each form of optimism. His main discussion (pp. 98-107) is of attitudinal optimism, "a policy of proceeding (when possible) in the confident hope that a future-oriented optimism of tendency or prospect is indeed warranted" (p. 98). The justification of attitudinal optimism, Rescher argues, is pragmatic rather than evidential; it is warranted if there is not evidence to the contrary and if good consequences ensue from adopting the attitude. The idea is that proceeding with hope sometimes improves chances for success. But this justification is not general and universal; it is limited to suitable circumstance. Rescher ties this discussion to the main theme of the book by suggesting that a dedication to ideals represents an interesting mode of optimism and that a person's idealism can "form the focus of an optimistic attitude of hopeful expectation that action in the light of this ideal is appropriate and worthwhile" (p. 112). This can be justified because it leads to better results.

Chapter V deals with the nature and limitations of ideals. Rescher paints what he calls a Kantian picture of ideals, characterizing them as "being perfect and altogether flawless," as "being unreal, imaginary, accessible in idea alone." "An ideal is a model or pattern of things too perfect for actual realization in this world" (p. 115). Sometimes we cannot even say precisely what the concrete realization of an ideal would be like. When discussing the ontological status of ideals, Rescher disavows Platonic realism, the view that ideals have thought-independent existence. According to Rescher, ideals are entities that exist in thought alone and whose "reality" lies in their impetus on human thought and action. Ideals are said to be "akin to such quasi-fictive reference devices as the equator or the prime meridian." The role of ideals is "as a tool for intelligent planning of the conduct of life" (p. 119).

Rescher warns us that ideals can get out of line, be abused, or become "monstrous." Returning to the example of different good-making features of a car, it would be foolish to devise a car that is "perfectly safe" but whose maximum speed is 1.75 MPH. This would achieve one good-making feature at the total expense of another. Thus ideals limit one another in actual operation (pp. 127-29). Compromise among ideals is desirable. This requires sometimes limiting the pursuit of an ideal because of its interaction with other values. And not only can

ideals be unbalanced, but some can be wicked or evil (though it is not the purpose of this volume to say which ideals are good and which are evil).

The power of ideals is discussed in the concluding Chapter VI. Rescher tells us that human aspiration is not restricted by realities; "nature has managed to evolve a creature who aspires to more than nature can offer" (p. 132). Though "ideals are, in a way, mere fictions, they nevertheless direct and canalize our thought and action" (p. 133). "The validation of an ideal is derivative . . . it lies in the influence that it exerts on the lives of its human exponents through the mediation of thought" (pp. 136-37). Ideals are tested by their practical consequences for human well-being. Whether an ideal is feasible does not matter; "what counts with an ideal is not the question of its *attainment* but the question of the benefits that accrue from its *pursuit*" (p. 137).

In concluding, I shall make two brief critical remarks. The first concerns the claim that agents can rationally pursue goals the attainment of which they *know* to be impossible. In spite of Rescher's claims to the contrary, one must wonder if the commander who is allegedly setting out to win a hopeless battle in order to impress his superiors is really pursuing the former goal. If he honestly regards the battle as hopeless, isn't he simply hoping to appear to try to win it? The case of one who declares his candidacy for the presidency of the U. S. is somewhat different. Many such individuals surely think that they have at least a slim chance to win. And among those who do not think this, arguably the real pursuit is of side effects, such as providing a public forum for the interests of minorities, having some say in who the candidate for the vice presidency will be, and the like. It is just hard to see how an agent can sincerely believe that a goal is unattainable and yet at the same time regard himself as pursuing *that* goal. It seems that often such an agent is really pursuing side effects; moreover, Rescher does not say nearly enough, I think, to convince the reader that "*there just is no further operative difference* between pursuing a goal whose probability of realization is seen as miniscule and pursuing a goal whose probability is seen as nil." There seems to be an important difference.

The second critical point concerns Rescher's rejection of the principle that 'ought' implies 'can'. He argues that it is contrary to commonsense to deny either that there are genuine dilemmas or that the Principle of Combination holds. It seems, however, that it is also contrary to commonsense to maintain that agents are sometimes morally required to do the impossible. That there are moral dilemmas, that the Principle of Combination holds, and that 'ought' implies 'can' all seem to be theses that have intuitive appeal. Since the conjunction of the three is inconsistent, at least one must be given up. But the argument for which must be rejected needs to go beyond appeals to commonsense to the deeper level of theory. Too little is done in this regard, I think. Rescher's other argument against the principle that 'ought' implies 'can' asserts that if an agent through no fault of his own is unable to fulfill an obligation — for example, to keep a promise — it is still true that he ought to do so. The principle contains a kernel of truth, Rescher holds, but only insofar as it indicates that incapacity negates blame for failure to carry out an obligation. As Rescher is aware, he is rejecting the more traditional conception of the principle, namely, that incapacity removes obligation. For this to be convincing, however, I believe that a fuller picture of morality with the altered understanding of the principle is necessary. Absent such an account and an argument for why such a picture of morality is more plausible, one has little reason to reject the more traditional understanding of "'ought' implies 'can'."

This book is well written and interesting. It explores topics too often ignored by contemporary philosophers. Rescher's critique in Chapter III of the view that rational choice consists in maximization of utility is excellent, one of the better of which I am aware. Readers will sometimes wish that more was said about various topics pursued, but they will find this book stimulating.