

***The Tyranny of the Ideal: Justice in a Diverse Society*, by
Gerald Gaus. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. 289 pp.
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Imagine a business ethicist named Mortimer who is beginning a project on ethical employment practices. Morty has been keeping up with the literature and has noticed that a lot of business ethics has taken its cue from political philosophy, drawing on theorists like Rawls and Habermas in order to establish the moral stakes of commercial activity. Morty also notices that political philosophers from Plato to Rawls have often pursued their projects by imagining an ideal vision of society, using this as a basis for judging their society and figuring out ways of improving it. So, Morty decides that the best way to do philosophical business ethics would be to start with a hypothetical ideal society, see where some phenomenon of interest to the business ethicist fits within it, describe it, and then use that as a way of thinking critically about our own practices of business and management. Or he will start with, say, Rawls's well-ordered society, Nozick's Nightwatchmen state, or Habermasian deliberative democracy, figure out the description of markets and distributive justice implied therein, and then figure out what sorts of employment practices would fit within these institutions. Mortimer would then have a Rawlsian, Nozickian, or Habermasian theory of employment that he can use to assess business practices and scholarly debates.

This seems like a reasonable way of doing things, and many influential and talented scholars of business ethics have followed something like Mortimer's approach. However, Gaus's book, *The Tyranny of the Ideal*, should give business ethicists considerable pause in pursuing such projects. Gaus's argument is that political philosophies grounded in a search for an ideal to anchor their critical and prescriptive ambitions, so-called "ideal theories," are bound to fail: "under the conditions of human existence, we cannot know what such an ideal would be....only those in a morally heterogeneous society have a reasonable hope of actually understanding what an ideal society would be like, but in such a society we will never be collectively devoted to any single ideal" (xix). The book is roughly structured around vindicating these two claims: the first half argues that a theory of the ideal society will always present very deep problems that can only possibly be overcome through maximizing the diversity of perspectives; the second half shows that maximizing the diversity of opinions requires establishing institutions (the "Open Society") that abandon the hope of structuring our society according to an ideal.

What is Gaus's concern with ideal theory? Allow me to illustrate with an example germane to business ethics. Imagine three people are arguing about the merits of adopting a plan for "universal basic income" (UBI). One is a revolutionary socialist, one is a left-of-center liberal, and one is a libertarian anarcho-capitalist. All three agree that UBI would be an improvement over the status quo. The socialist thinks

that it will help decommodify labor to a greater degree, the liberal thinks it will make for a more efficient welfare state, and the libertarian thinks it will decrease market distortion. Yet, surprisingly, the three do not agree that we should implement UBI. While the liberal thinks we should, the socialist and libertarian are vigorously against it; the socialist worries that UBI will further entrench capitalist relations and forestall a socialist revolution, and the libertarian worries that UBI will further entrench the welfare state and forestall the possibility of a stateless market society.

On Gaus's terms, the liberal on the one hand, and the libertarian and socialist on the other, are operating on different models of theorizing. Whereas the libertarian and socialist are basing their judgments on an ideal theory, the liberal is basing hers on a "climbing model": instead of thinking about our society in relation to an ideal society, our hypothetical liberal is trying to make improvements to the society we find ourselves in here and now (she is not imagining a taller mountain, but simply "climbing" the mountain we find ourselves upon now). The latter seems very reasonable, and most ideal theorists think they are doing something similar. However, Gaus convincingly shows that ideal theorists are not entitled to claim they are climbers. What distinguishes an "ideal theory" from the "climbing model" is that the former uses an ideal not merely as a way of generating evaluative criteria (the climbing model has evaluative criteria, too), but also as a way of orienting us toward an optimal state of affairs. This is why the libertarian and the socialist can agree with the liberal that UBI is an improvement to the status quo, while disagreeing that it should be implemented. They agree on certain evaluative criteria, but think that it puts us on a path that leads us away from the ideal. (To be clear, this is just meant as an illustration: liberals by no means monopolize the "climbing" approach, and many liberals base their politics on idealized visions.)

The problem for the ideal theorist is that we inherently know much more about our world than a hypothetical one; as a result, we also know much more about institutional configurations that are somewhat similar to ours—social structures that are in our "neighborhood"—than those of the ideal social structure. Ideal theorists therefore must inevitably confront what Gaus calls "the choice," i.e., choosing "between relatively certain (perhaps large) local improvements in justice and pursuit of a considerably less certain ideal, which would yield optimal justice" (82). Thus the socialist and libertarian in our example choose to forego what they admit are vast improvements for workers or markets, in favor of pursuing a classless socialist society or stateless capitalist society that we can only know in vague outline. Indeed, if the ideal theorist chose the other way, and decided to make improvements in our current situation without a concern for the way it oriented us toward an ideal, we would want to ask why we need an ideal theory at all. Why not just try to improve our condition here and now and dispense with the utopian vision?

There is a subtle and important institutional insight inherent to this argument, which is not always taken seriously by business ethicists. The underlying reason that local improvements in justice cannot be assumed to be oriented toward an ideal is because of the interdependence and complexity of institutions: certain things will be justice-promoting only when other institutional prerequisites exist. So, for example, a libertarian might think that a *Lochner*-style interpretation of employment contracts

will be just only given a certain background market structure; a committed social democrat might think that free university enrollment would be just only given a background of equal primary and secondary educational opportunities. Implementing one policy without the other will tend to decrease, not increase, the justness of a society even though doing so brings institutions closer to one's ideal.

The result, simply put, is that institutional similarity is not perfectly correlated with justice; improving local justice may mean implementing institutions that lead away from the ideal institutional configuration, and working toward the ideal institutional configuration will involve making things considerably worse before they get better. This is important for business ethicists because we are often in the habit of thinking about only one aspect of a very complex and interdependent set of institutions: managerial decision making amidst a complex structure of corporate governance; corporate governance amidst dynamic and complex markets; markets amidst a complex and interdependent set of political and economic institutions; and so forth. Altering one aspect of these institutions and practices without thinking about how they fit within a larger whole misses how such a change may be impractical, or even harmful, in the face of institutional complexity.

Due to this problem of institutional interdependence, and our relative ignorance about the destination that utopian thought promises to guide us, "the choice" will always confront the ideal theorist. Consequently, Gaus argues that we ought to disregard our utopian impulses for ideal theory. In its place, we should strive for an Open Society where maximal perspectival diversity and engagement is encouraged. This proposal is informed by studies showing that predictive accuracy is improved by increasing the perspectival diversity of the predictors. This Open Society increases the quality of our moral assessments but requires that we "abandon the optimizing stance," and give up attempts to impose an ideal blueprint upon society (216). It is a compelling argument, though one wonders whether Gaus can consistently offer the sorts of institutional details about his Open Society, as he does, after effectively inveighing against theories of ideal societies. Is the Open Society not a kind of ideal?

It must be noted that Gaus is not the first to criticize the mode of ideal theory. Indeed, the "ideal/non-ideal theory" debate has become something of a cottage industry in political philosophy and political theory, resulting in a large number of very smart people thinking about thinking, instead of thinking about politics. Of course, navel gazing is a time-honored philosophical pastime that also goes back to Plato, and there is nothing inherently wrong with it. The problem is that such debates easily become centered on technical details that are many degrees removed from the political and social questions that originally motivate them. This raises the barriers to entry for the interested-but-uninitiated onlookers from cognate sub-fields and disciplines. Gaus's book, unfortunately, does not exactly break from this trend. Gaus does frame the book admirably by explaining the stakes of the debate with many practical and political examples. However his mode of argumentation is generally wedded to a formal and analytic style that will likely be off-putting to those unfamiliar with it, and he spends many pages on details of debates that will seem unimportant or tangential to the interested onlooker.

This is unfortunate because the book has much to teach scholars outside of political philosophy, and business ethics in particular. The point raised above about institutional interdependency, for instance, has still managed to resist common acceptance in the field. But more generally, Gaus's argument should caution someone like Morty (and those who would follow him) against approaching business ethics from the vantage point of ideal theory. Conceiving of business ethics in terms of an ideal will tend to put such theorists in a dilemma of choosing between a much surer potential improvement, and a less secure ideal vision we know less about. Instead, taking Gaus's argument seriously should encourage business ethicists to acknowledge the diverse array of moral ideas we find around us. Instead of assuming such disagreements away, we should use them to make sense of a world that we are always in the process of understanding, and a moral order that we are always in the process of creating.