

## **On non-ideal individual epistemology**

Symposium on Robin McKenna's *Non-Ideal Epistemology*

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Robin McKenna's excellent *Non-Ideal Epistemology* is, among other things, a testament to restraint. McKenna does not want to unnecessarily inflame tensions between ideal and non-ideal theorists in epistemology. Often ideal and non-ideal projects are aimed at different target domains and not in tension with one another (though not always; e.g. McKenna 2023, ch. 6, especially pp. 112-21). In this commentary, I will have much less tact. I sketch a route by which the non-ideal epistemologist might become more belligerent towards their ideal counterparts. I do this by focusing on an area that McKenna mostly sets aside: non-ideal individual epistemology.

### **The possibility of non-ideal individual epistemology**

The fundamental theoretical contribution of McKenna's book is to tease apart discussions of idealization in epistemology from standard debates between individual and social epistemologists. On McKenna's plausible intellectual history, epistemologists have avoided explicitly debating the nature of idealizations in their work because such debates have often been subsumed under disagreements about whether to consider the social world in epistemological theory. Epistemologists do care about whether or not to idealize. But we have tended to run this debate together with others about whether to care more about (say) the infinitely-reasonable, fully-deductively-closed rational agent or (say) the vagaries of epistemic injustice within communities with unjust distributions of power and resources.

This is a mistake, McKenna contends. It is instead better to draw two cross-cutting distinctions: between ideal and non-ideal epistemology, on the one hand, and between individual and social epistemology, on the other. The best statement of the ideal/non-ideal distinction, according to McKenna, comes from Mills (2005)'s work on political theory. Epistemologists build models of the epistemic and cognitive world. Ideal theorists adopt various idealizations in their models. (They assume that the reasoner is insulated from social pressure, that she has infinite processing power and memory, that she can calculate Bayesian probabilities immediately, and so on.) The non-ideal epistemologist, in contrast, does not make these idealizations. They treat knowers and reasoners roughly as we find them in the world (often with significant input from psychology, political science, and sociology). This allows us to say the approaches to testimony in the social epistemologies of, for instance, Kelly (2005) and Fricker (2007) are at least as different from one another as those between individual and social epistemologists.

Taking the taxonomy at face value, one expects to find at least four projects the epistemologist could be engaged in: ideal individual epistemology, non-ideal individual epistemology, ideal social epistemology, and non-ideal social epistemology. McKenna admits that all four projects are at least possible, but the project of the book is ultimately to “identify an idealizing tendency in *social* epistemology” (McKenna 2023, p. 12). Individual epistemology (of either an idealized or non-idealized kind) is of less concern.<sup>1</sup> McKenna even admits it is “harder to see how you could do non-ideal epistemology without also doing social epistemology” (McKenna 2023, p. 21), though Bortolotti (2020) is given as an example.

These debates are both fundamental in aim and massive in scope. One should not criticize McKenna for only wanting to take on a subset of all possible positions here. My own nascent projects in epistemology (Karlan 2021; 2022) seems to lay squarely within non-ideal individual epistemology, however. So I have a practical interest, at least, in that area being just as crucial to the overall project as its more social counterparts.

I also think there are good reasons, within McKenna’s own framework, that such a project is not only possible, but represents a genuine contribution to non-ideal epistemology more broadly. If we think of epistemology, as McKenna does, as a modeling project, the choice of whether to add social variables to our models depends wholly on the modeling context. For many problems that McKenna considers (intellectual autonomy, denialism, duties to reply to criticism), those social variables will be indispensable. But for others (e.g. whether it is rational to use heuristics rather than deductively-valid rules when reasoning through complex problems; Todd & Gigerenzer 2012), it is not immediately obvious why social variables will be required (though see Heyes 2018). There is nothing about the framework that rules out modeling in this way, at least.

Other motivating reasons are external to the framework. There is a growing area of research (often going under different but related names, such as “bounded rationality”) that seems to fit squarely within the box carved out for non-ideal individual epistemology (e.g. Thorsad 2023; Dorst forthcoming). In what follows, I will offer another reason for optimism about non-ideal individual epistemology: it might offer

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<sup>1</sup> Though one could perhaps read the critique of traditional virtue epistemology in chapter seven of the book as, at least in part, a further critique of individual (ideal) epistemology (especially McKenna 2023, pp. 134-8). McKenna’s aim is actually more local than the above discussion makes it seem: the book is primarily focused on one particular kind of non-ideal social epistemology, called (following Cassam 2016) inquiry epistemology (and to be contrasted with traditional questions about knowledge and justification that might occupy either the individual or social epistemologist).

better answers to some foundational questions in epistemology than its ideal (individual) counterpart. Indeed, for some of the most fundamental questions about epistemic normativity, it is hard to see how one can avoid taking a non-ideal (individual) approach.

### **The primacy of the non-ideal**

One of the most fundamental questions in epistemology is “How should I reason?” We have a suite of options available to us, from fast heuristics that are cheap but fallible, to rigorous deductive rules that guarantee the answer if we can only follow them, and many others besides. How might the ideal and non-ideal theorist go about answering this basic question?<sup>2</sup>

The answer from the ideal theorist is relatively well-trodden territory. First, we must settle how the ideal epistemic agent should reason. This is by no means a solved issue. The ideal agent might be fragmented to avoid ending up in a bad evidential environment, for instance (Egan 2008). But suppose agreement could be reached. Suppose, for instance, that the rules of Bayesian updating represent a plausible ideal reasoning rule. There still remains the question: how should I, imperfect cognitive being that I am, reason? (Bayesian reasoning is notoriously difficult *tout court*, let alone for a non-ideal agent like me to execute.) The standard answer is that I should *approximate* (Staffel 2020). I should find ways to get myself as close as possible to the rational ideal. The closer I am to the rational ideal, the better I am doing, epistemically. The devil is in the details as to how to best conceive of both approximation and success in this domain, of course. But this is the strategy to follow.

As McKenna is quick to admit (but does not linger on), there are good reasons to want to follow this strategy. It guarantees (or nearly guarantees) that, if you end up getting something right, you get it right for the right reasons. In certain contexts, using something like the matching heuristic might be demonstrated to be more reliable than trying to sit still and reason through a problem oneself (Hogarth & Karelaia 2007). But

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<sup>2</sup> This is, of course, to conceive of epistemology in fundamentally *normative* terms. This might stack the deck in favor of the non-ideal theorist just slightly. Greco (2023, pp. 170-5) argues that models in epistemology often have both descriptive (e.g. what reasoning capacities do we actually have?) and normative (e.g. how should we reason?) components. These components are often more difficult to disentangle than it might initially seem, a claim Greco defends at length in the book. And this is good news for the ideal theorist, as descriptive idealizations often have a kind of explanatory power not available to those doing non-ideal theory (see, for considerable detail, Greco 2023, pp. 124-42). Now, Greco’s overall point that *all* theory involves idealization is well-taken. But I nonetheless maintain that certain questions in epistemology (both ideal and non-ideal) are separable enough into normative and descriptive idealizations that this discussion is not rendered obsolete (though, given space limitations, this is more a promissory note than anything else).

it's hard to see, from the ideal theorist's perspective, why this should matter. Button-mashing might help the pure novice win at a fighting game, but no one thinks the way to win tournaments is just to systematize one's button-mashing. The ideal theorist thus seems well-motivated in her position.

And yet the position can seem like a rather odd response to the question of how to reason. As McKenna argues forcefully in chapter two of the book, idealizing in this way risks constructing an epistemology that has nothing to say to creatures like *us*. We look at the recommendations the ideal theorist makes for how we should reason. We know in advance that, if we tried to follow these rules, things would go *knowably worse* for us (epistemically) than if we followed some other, less demanding rule. (We would not be able to apply the rule, for instance, and thus would not get *any* answer to the reasoning problem under deliberation.) We are nothing like the superintelligent creatures the epistemologist uses to set the normative ideal. And yet, we are supposed to follow these rules, and come to know less about the world as a result. McKenna's contention seems correct: this is not a good way of meeting our epistemic goals.

There are several ways other than McKenna's that the non-ideal epistemologist might motivate this point. One might think that ought implies can in epistemology, for instance (e.g. Helton 2020). It is obvious that we cannot follow the rules that the ideal epistemologist says we should follow when deciding how to reason. Those rules have no normative pull over us.<sup>3</sup> Or we might instead think that what we should do is tied, in some way, to what our ideal adviser would advise us to do (e.g. Smith 1994). Would the ideal adviser tell us to follow knowably worse rules that will frustrate our epistemic goals? That seems highly unlikely. No matter which route one takes, McKenna's contention seems plausible. Trying to approximate the ideal will make us knowably epistemically worse off than using other strategies.

### **Non-ideal (individual) reasoning**

This seems to establish, to me anyway, that the non-ideal is of primary importance when considering one of the most fundamental questions in epistemology. It is notable, then, that after making this argument, McKenna moves on to a series of chapters that assume the point is of primary importance in *social* epistemology. Again, this is not to bemoan anyone their right to focus on whatever they find interesting. But it would be a shame for readers to come away from the book thinking that a similar move does not

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<sup>3</sup> As chapters 7 and 8 of the book demonstrates, McKenna is no fan of this move. The claim that non-ideal epistemology can nonetheless be *demanding* is one of the most interesting moves in the book, and deserves significant treatment on its own. I confess, however, to finding the kinds of claims Helton makes deeply plausible, and for reasons that McKenna's account might be able to recognize (e.g. that demanding epistemic norms just do not get a grip on creatures like us).

work equally well in individual epistemology. Just as ideal norms of intellectual autonomy fail to get their grips on us as non-ideal human inquirers, ideal norms of individual reasoning should be abandoned in favor of non-ideal *individual* norms of reasoning. It is not clear, at least, why it might not be preferable in our non-ideal models to occasionally bracket considerations of social influence and consider which reasoning pattern makes sense for a reasoner to use in a specific case.

Reading between the lines, one can get a sense of what McKenna means when claiming that it is hard (but not impossible) to do non-ideal individual epistemology. Once you ratchet down the idealization in a model to make the creatures in it more like us, how would you even go about modeling without social variables? We are fundamentally social creatures, and the vast majority of our epistemic lives are suffused with social influence. Yet it is interesting that, in the course of defending non-ideal theory, McKenna makes use of many examples (e.g. agents falling under one or another epistemic norm) that need not have an immediately obvious social component (e.g. McKenna 2023, pp. 36-7). Given the permissiveness of McKenna's overall project, it would be surprising if it turned out there were *no* situations where relaxing idealizing assumptions without adding social ones would prove fruitful.

The question "How should I reason?" seems to have exactly this flavor. Sometimes, the question of how to reason is mostly or completely fixed by social considerations (e.g. Mercier & Sperber 2011). The non-ideal theorist should not deny this. Other times, however, it makes sense to model the non-ideal agent as concerned only with which reasoning process she should take up to achieve an epistemic goal. (These need not be situations where politically motivated reasoning will be expected to occur, avoiding the skepticism of chapter 8 of the book.) In these cases, the non-ideal theorist *still* seems to have the advantage over the ideal theorist. Often, there are a number of different approaches we could take to reasoning through a particular problem. Some approaches are heuristical. They are easy for us to deploy but of only moderate reliability. Other approaches are more ideal. They involve deploying ideal reasoning rules that are hard to correctly apply and take up a lot of cognitive resources. For the ideal agent, whose cognitive resources are essentially infinite, resource management is a non-issue. But for a non-ideal agent, many answers to the question "how should I reason?" will require taking into consideration cognitive resource management (Leider & Griffiths 2020). A theory of how one ought to reason, then, will have to be a theory of (among other things) resource management. To do anything else is, as McKenna would have it, to knowingly fall short of one's epistemic goals.

And this is where, as I see it, the non-ideal epistemologist can dig in their heels and become more belligerent towards their idealizing counterparts. No matter where one

falls on debates about the role of the social in epistemology, the non-ideal theorist is going to be able to say things about our epistemic obligations that both seem true and make no sense in light of ideal theory. When those epistemic obligations concern others (as they obviously do when thinking about duties to reply, say), McKenna's extensive arguments in this book will be of central importance. But even when those epistemic obligations make no obvious mention of others (as, I've suggested, certain versions of "How should I reason?" seem not to), the ideal theorist cannot rest easy. The non-ideal theorist (this time, the non-ideal individual epistemologist) still has a much better story to tell, one that will help the agent achieve their epistemic goals in a way that approximating the ideal theory cannot. And this seems to imply, if not outright claim, that the non-ideal is of primary importance in the study of epistemic normativity in a way that the ideal is not.

### **Conclusion**

It would be far too much, in a short book commentary like this one, to claim that this argument alone shows much of anything about the primacy of the non-ideal over the ideal in epistemology. In addition to considerations of modesty, there are in-principle questions about the possibility of (a non-arbitrary) non-ideal epistemology, raised forcefully by Carr (2022), that ultimately will need to be addressed by a mature non-ideal epistemology (though Thorstad 2023 offers significant hope). This reflection represents more of an argument sketch than it does the final word on the subject. But it strikes me this is the right way for the non-ideal theorist to go. Whether social or individual, the non-ideal approach has key advantages over the ideal approach, especially when asking some of the most basic questions in epistemology.

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