Moral Aspirations and Ideals

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My aim is to vindicate two distinct and important moral categories – *ideals* and *aspirations* – which have received modest, and sometimes negative, attention in recent normative debates. An *ideal* is a conception of perfection or model of excellence around which we can shape our thoughts and actions. An *aspiration*, by contrast, is an attitudinal position of steadfast commitment to, striving for, or deep desire or longing for, an ideal. I locate these two concepts in relation to more familiar moral concepts such as *duty*, *virtue*, and *the good* to demonstrate, amongst other things, first, that what is morally significant about ideals and aspirations cannot be fully accommodated within a virtue ethical framework that gives a central role to the Virtuous Person as a purported model of excellence. On a certain interpretation, the Virtuous Person is not a meaningful ideal for moral agents. Second, I articulate one sense in which aspirations are morally required imaginative acts given their potential to expand the realm of practical moral possibility.

Two distinct and important moral categories that have received modest, and sometimes negative, attention in recent normative debates are *ideals* and *aspirations*.[1] My purpose in this article is to vindicate these two moral categories, particularly aspirations, by locating them in relation to more familiar moral concepts such as *duty*, *virtue*, and *the good*. I begin by explicating and refining a conception of *ideals* that has been advanced most recently by C. A. J. Coady, Nicholas Rescher, and others (Section 1).[2] I then relate the concept of an *ideal* to the distinct and under-examined concept of an *aspiration*, which is an attitudinal position of steadfast commitment to, and striving for, an ideal (Section 2). Next, I distinguish the role that aspirations play within morality from a standard account of virtue ethics, showing, amongst other things, that there is reason to question the intelligibility

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[1] For an expression of concern about ideals as being inextricably linked to fanaticism ('the pursuit of perfection does seem to me a recipe for bloodshed'), see Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (London, 1990). For a defence of a role for ideals within morality, see C. A. J. Coady, *Messy Morality* (Oxford, 2008), and Nicholas Rescher, *Ethical Idealism: An Inquiry into the Nature and Function of Ideals* (Berkeley, 1987). For a defence of aspirations within morality, see Lon Fuller, *The Morality of Law* (New Haven, 1977). Also see John Kekes, *The Enlargement of Life: Moral Imagination at Work* (Ithaca, 2006).

[2] Cf. Kimberley Brownlee, 'Reasons and Ideals', *Philosophical Studies* (published online 16 October 2009; DOI: 10.1007/s11098-009-9462-y).

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of a certain conception of the Virtuous Person as a model or ideal for moral agents (Section 3). Then, I both outline aspects of the regulative role of ideals and aspirations within practical reasoning (Section 4) and examine the interrelation between aspirations and obligations (Section 5)[3] in order to sketch out a particular conception of moral agency. On this conception of moral agency, moral agents are not passive respondents to pre-given moral problems. Rather, to varying degrees, they can and ought to be active shapers and creators of moral experience. Briefly put, through the cultivation of meaningful moral aspirations, moral agents can positively expand their own and others' moral horizons, which indicates that aspirations to realize genuinely valuable ideals are not simply valuable commitments to have, but often are morally required, imaginative acts. The view sketched here is a prolegomenon for a fuller account of aspiration within morality that emphasizes the value of creativity, inspiration, and noble imagination.

1. IDEALS

In recent debates in normative theory, the concept of a substantive *ideal* and the concept of an *aspiration* have largely been treated, where they have been treated at all, as interchangeable. In *The Morality of Law*, for example, Lon Fuller distinguishes what he calls 'the morality of aspiration' from 'the morality of duty', but does little to specify the concept of *aspiration*. Fuller neither distinguishes aspirations from ideals nor considers in any detail how aspirations and duties might intersect.[4] In his recent book *Messy Morality*, C. A. J. Coady devotes a chapter to the topic of ideals, and briefly criticizes Fuller for failing to appreciate how ideals and duties may intersect (a topic I discuss in Section 5). However, Coady uses the terms 'ideals' and 'aspirations' seemingly interchangeably without explicating this way of conceptualizing ideals. My purpose in this section and the next is to distinguish the concept of an *ideal* from that of an *aspiration* so as to sketch out in later sections ways in which each plays a distinct and important role within morality.

Substantive ideals are models of excellence or conceptions of perfection around which we can orient our thoughts and conduct. Some such models are largely personal in nature (such as athletic excellence, musical virtuosity, intellectual achievement, and civic virtue); others are largely public (global prosperity, social justice, community solidarity, peace). Both can guide us in the growth and

[3] In this discussion, the terms 'duty' and 'obligation' are used interchangeably.

[4] In *The Morality of Law*, Fuller characterizes the 'morality of aspiration' as the morality of the Good Life, of excellence, of the fullest realization of human powers. Fuller, *Morality of Law*, p. 5.

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development of our characters, motivations and intentions, actions, goals, commitments, reflections, and relationships.[5] By contrast, an *aspiration* is an attitudinal position. It is an attitude of steadfast commitment to, striving for, or deep desire and longing for an ideal as a model of excellence presently beyond those who strive for it. As I shall argue in the next section, genuine aspiration is the appropriate attitude to adopt toward our genuinely valuable ideals.

Coady, Rescher, Dorothy Emmet, and others have proposed various features as the features that collectively distinguish ideals paradigmatically from ordinary goals and values. The four features identified by Coady, upon which I shall focus, are comprehensiveness, (perceived) admirability, constitutiveness, and unrealizability. In what follows, I refine and qualify this list, and add to it a fifth feature on the interrelation between ideals and aspirations (Section 2).[6]

First, ideals are more comprehensive and general than most goals are, and as such, unlike ordinary goals, ideals can form the core focus of a life that is perceived by us, its occupant, and by others as meaningful. I understand 'generality' here to refer not to any kind of universality about ideals (since many ideals are personal ideals and not universal or common ideals), but rather to the breadth and range of the scope of an ideal to the core domains and concerns of a person's life. For example, an ideal of athletic excellence is more comprehensive and general in nature than the healthy person's ordinary goal of going jogging once a week. Similarly, an ideal of global prosperity is more comprehensive and general in nature than the well-off person's ordinary goal of giving money occasionally to a charity. In each case, the ideal, but not the goal, could plausibly form the central focus of the person's life.

Second, whereas our goals need not garner our esteem when we pursue them, our chosen or acknowledged ideals typically do garner our esteem as things that we rank very highly as goods.[7] However, it does not follow from our high estimation or admiration of a professed ideal that that ideal is genuinely estimable or admirable. Like Coady (and Rescher), I take an objective view of ideals. The Nazis' ideal of racial purity seemed admirable to its pursuers, but they were mistaken about its admirability. Such a professed ideal has no genuine value, I take it; it is really a 'false' ideal (or only formally an ideal). There is reason not to admire either it or any person's efforts to realize it. By

[5] For an overview of substantive ideals and deliberative ideals, see Connie Rosati, 'Ideals', *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London, 1998).

[6] The following five paragraphs develop material discussed in Brownlee, 'Reasons and Ideals'.

[7] Coady, *Messy Morality*, pp. 51–2.

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contrast, for a genuinely valuable ideal, there is reason to admire both it and any success a person has in realizing it.

Having reason to admire both an ideal and someone's cultivation of it is distinct from having good reason to cultivate our ideal ourselves. We may admire the musical virtuoso without having reason to regard her genuinely valuable ideal as an ideal we ought to cultivate ourselves. And, even in cases where we do have reason to cultivate that ideal, our own commitment to other equally valuable ideals may make its cultivation impossible. In cases where such cultivation is optional, we may appeal to P. F. Strawson's observation that incompatibility does not imply a lesser regard for the ideals not cultivated since our steady adherence to a single ideal picture of life may coexist with the strongest desire that other incompatible ideals should have their steady adherents too.[8] That said, not all ideals are optional. For example, some ideals recommend themselves to all while at the same time are particularly salient to specific ways of life. Coady observes that, ' . . . the ideal of truth, for instance, has an objective claim to the attention of all, [but] it may have a special role in the lives of intellectuals, just as the ideal of justice must concern everyone, but have a special significance for judges.'[9] And other ideals recommend themselves to particular persons in light of those persons' positions, say as parents. This non-optional feature of some ideals, and the conflicting obligations it implies, will be discussed further in Section 5.

Third, ideals are more pervasive and constitutive than ordinary goals are. Pervasiveness and constitutiveness, which Coady treats together, actually pick out distinct though related properties of ideals. Pervasiveness has at least two possible dimensions. The first pertains to the multiplicity of ways in which a given ideal might be realized (a fact that is true of many goals as well) and to the multiplicity of constitutive elements of that ideal, not all of which are necessarily compatible with each other. There are both different, plausible conceptions of a genuine ideal of musical virtuosity and different dimensions of excellence within a single plausible conception. Similarly, there are both different body types and physiques that are suited to different forms of physical excellence and different components of ability within a single physique. The second dimension of pervasiveness pertains to the range of domains of our reasoning that are shaped and influenced by our chosen ideals. An ideal has a pervasive, all-consuming effect upon our lives, thoughts, and reasoning when it becomes our core focus.

Concerning constitutiveness, Coady states that someone who is possessed of an ideal 'acts now in the light of that ideal and does

[8] P. F. Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment, and Other Essays* (London, 1974), p. 28.
[9] Coady, *Messy Morality*, p. 70.

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not merely do certain ideal-neutral things that will bring about the ideal in some remote future . . . the ideal comes to exist to a greater or lesser degree in the agent as the agent seeks to live it.'[10] In other words, the core behaviour undertaken to cultivate an ideal is to varying degrees constitutive of that ideal itself and not merely an independent, instrumentally useful means for pursuing it. This echoes Aristotle's conception of virtue, which relies upon a distinction between purely instrumental promotion of an end and constitutive promotion of that end.[11] For Aristotle, the exercise of the virtues promotes the good of man in the constitutive sense.[12] Exercising the virtues is not a contingent, preparatory, or purely instrumental part of coming to live a good life. It is constitutive of such a life. Such a non-contingent, constitutive connection holds between all ideals (valuable or not) and the core conduct that the committed person carries out to honour and to realize them. The activities that the committed person takes to cultivate her ideal will become increasingly constitutive of that ideal as she comes to embody the ideal to a greater or lesser degree. (That said, some actions taken in promotion of an ideal will be purely instrumental and could be substituted by other actions to no lesser effect. For example, the efforts of a philanthropist to further the career of a rising musical genius are purely instrumental to the cultivation of the ideal of virtuosity.) In Section 3, this point will be developed more fully in relation to the cultivation of virtue.

Fourth, in different ways, for different reasons, and to different degrees, ideals paradigmatically are unrealizable. Nicholas Rescher, for one, takes an overly strong view of the unrealizability of all ideals. He states that an ideal is

> a very model or paradigm that answers to the purposes at issue in a way that is flawless and incapable of being improved upon: 'the true friend,' 'the flawless performer,' 'the consummate physician.' Such ideals, of course, are 'too good to be true.'[13]

[10] Coady, *Messy Morality*, p. 57.

[11] In cases of instrumental promotion of an end, the means are external to, and only contingently connected with, the chosen end, and hence any number of means may be adopted to achieve the end. Buying food promotes the end of eating dinner, but so too does going to a restaurant or, perhaps, begging at someone's door. By contrast, in cases of constitutive promotion, the action we take (or the intentions, beliefs, and attitudes we adopt) is a component of our end, that is, performing that action *partly* constitutes achieving the end. Eating the main course 'promotes' eating dinner. Cf. T. H. Irwin, 'Aristotle', *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London, 2003).

[12] Aristotle's position, as summarized by Alastair MacIntyre, is that the good of man is constituted by a complete human life lived at its best, to which the exercise of the virtues is a central part. A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, 1981), pp. 139–40.

[13] Rescher, *Ethical Idealism*, p. 117.

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While some ideals might take this Rescherian form, other generally acknowledged ideals do not. Unrealizability comes in degrees. Here are some examples of increasing orders of unrealizability. First, something may be an ideal for one person but not for another person when, for the latter person, that thing is neither unrealizable nor unrealized. It would be appropriate to describe my musical ideal in terms of playing the cello as well as Yo Yo Ma does, but obviously this is not an appropriate description of a musical ideal for Yo Yo Ma. Second, something may be an ideal for one person or for all persons at a given point in time, but prove to be realizable at a later date. For example, despite the odds, I might come to play the cello as well as Yo Yo Ma does. Or, we might succeed as a global community in eradicating poverty. Third, something may be an ideal for one person (or for all persons) and persist in remaining out of reach even though it is possible, in principle, to realize that ideal. For example, Coady observes that the philosopher's own ideal of truth, in all likelihood, will forever elude her even though, in principle, it is possible that she could always make only true assertions and sound arguments.[14]

Despite their varying degrees of unrealizability, ideals as a class can be distinguished, I believe, from deep impossibilities, examples of which include living forever, travelling back in time, squaring the circle, and giving birth to oneself.[15] This is the case at least partly because deep impossibilities, in some respects, defy the imagination. At the very least, they defy the imaginative contemplation of how to undertake to realize them and, in extreme cases, they defy even the meaningful representation in the mind of the form their realization would take (e.g. squaring the circle, giving birth to oneself). One reason that deep impossibilities defy the imagination in some way is, presumably, that they lie beyond what is possible in principle. By contrast, ideals, as conceived of here, originate in the use of the imagination. They not only arise from reflection upon how best to push beyond our apparent limits, but also, consequently, their cultivation allows us 'to contemplate value possibilities that transcend the restrictive confines of the real'.[16] Ideals, as I conceive of them, lie within what is possible in principle, though they often may sit at the outer limits thereof.

Finally, in addition to the above features, there is, I argue, a fifth distinguishing feature of ideals that, unlike ordinary goals, ideals are the appropriate objects of aspirations. In other words, they are the

[14] Although Coady says that 'The unrealizability of this ideal of total truth does not stand in the way of striving to achieve it', nevertheless he suspects that those ideals that are unrealizable are misconceived as ends to be aimed at in this way: Coady, *Messy Morality*, pp. 59–61.

[15] The example of giving birth to oneself is borrowed from John Gardner.

[16] Rescher, *Ethical Idealism*, p. 83.

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appropriate objects of attitudes of striving for what is presently beyond or above us. In what follows, I explicate both the concept of *aspiration* and the nature of the relation between aspirations and ideals.

2. ASPIRATIONS

My claim here is that ideals are the appropriate objects of our steadfast commitment, desire, or longing for that which is presently beyond or above us. The phrase 'presently beyond or above' is key here in two senses. First, it distinguishes aspirations from the attitudes that we may appropriately adopt toward ordinary goals that we have not yet achieved. A gardener's ordinary goal of weeding the garden today or a reader's ordinary goal of finishing a book this week is not something presently beyond or above her, as these goals lie very much within the confines of the real and the realizable. The gardener's goal of weeding her garden today and the reader's goal of finishing her book are as yet unrealized, but *ceteris paribus* they are not in any meaningful sense presently unrealizable. That said, the phrase 'presently beyond or above' should not be taken to imply that an ideal is somehow literally 'beyond' or 'above' those who espouse it. Given the constitutive nature of ideals, an ideal can be deemed 'presently beyond' us while lying within us as something that, in principle at least, can be cultivated. I view the relation of an aspiration to an ideal as being akin to that of an acorn to an oak tree. The tree lies within the acorn, just as the ideal lies within the imagination and commitment of the aspirant, but will not grow unless planted in a suitable place, cultivated, nourished, strengthened, and protected.

Second, the phrase 'presently beyond or *above*' highlights the fact that genuine aspirations are oriented around what has genuine value, or rather, what is in an evaluative sense 'above' the person who strives for it. Those aspirations that are oriented toward what is not valuable, such as the Nazis' aspiration for racial purity, are aspirations in the formal sense, just as the ideals that are their objects are ideals in the formal sense. They are aspirations for something presently beyond them, which they mistakenly believe is highly estimable. Similarly, a person might, in a formal sense, aspire to be an expert assassin. But, since the activities of an assassin are not evaluatively above her (unless she presently is engaged in acts of graver moral turpitude and somehow is unable to alter her conduct), her aspiration is only formally an aspiration. By contrast, genuine aspirations, not all of which are moral aspirations, are oriented toward genuinely valuable ideals that are presently above their pursuers. The word 'above' signals that the thing longed for is not only presently beyond the pursuer, but also evaluatively higher or better than some aspect of her current situation or conduct.

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Support for this conception of *aspiration* as an attitudinal position of striving is found in the etymology of the verb 'to aspire'. This verb and its cognate 'to inspire' derive from the Latin verbs *aspirare* and *inspirare*, which are taken from the root *spirare*, which means 'to breathe'. *Aspirare* means 'to breathe upon', and also 'to seek to reach', 'to ascend', and *inspirare* means 'to breathe into'.[17] It is the person who is inspired (that is, the person who has breathed in a great idea), who can aspire for a conception of greatness that is presently beyond her. Undoubtedly, the noun 'aspiration' can be used to refer to the object of our aspiring attitudes (our ideals) as well as to the attitude of aspiring itself, in the same way that the term 'desire' can be used to refer to either the attitude of desiring or the object of that attitude. What matters for our purposes is that we properly distinguish between the attitude of an aspirant and the object of her attention. I, therefore, use the term 'ideal' to refer to the object in question and the term 'aspiration' to refer to a person's attitude of commitment and striving toward that object.

Finally, the concept of *aspiration* can be linked to that of *ambition*. Although the notion of *ambition* historically carried negative connotations of avarice and selfishness, it can be defined in evaluatively neutral terms as the ardent desire for something considered to be advantageous, honouring, or creditable. Ambition is, as the mathematician G. H. Hardy puts it, a noble passion for success.[18] It captures a broad domain of passionate desire, of which, on my view, aspiration is a particular type. Genuine aspiration is that type of ambition which is oriented toward something presently above the person who longs or strives for it. Although neither ambitions nor the professed ideals that can be their objects are necessarily imbued with value, since the perception of value like the desire for excellence can be misplaced or mistaken, nevertheless when the perception of value and the ardent desire for excellence are well-placed, then ambitions are well described as genuine aspirations and their objects are genuinely valuable ideals. To Hardy's mind, the passion that is ambition is the driving force behind nearly all the best work of the world.[19] The noblest such passion, he says, is to leave behind us something of permanent value.[20] Such a passion is well characterized with the language of genuine *aspiration*.

My conception of aspiration as a passion to strive for what is presently above us (an ideal), and often to create something of lasting value,

[17] Oxford English Dictionary (current online edition).
[18] G. H. Hardy, *A Mathematician's Apology* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 77.
[19] Hardy, *Apology*, p. 77.
[20] Specifying what makes a given professed ideal a genuinely valuable ideal, i.e. a *genuine* ideal, would require a fuller analysis of the nature of value than can be offered here. In what follows, the term 'ideal' refers to genuinely valuable ideals.

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has particular application to morality as a domain of value. The contemplation of and commitment to value possibilities that extend, to varying degrees and for different reasons, 'beyond the confines of the real' can aid us in cultivating lasting moral value. I examine below some of the ways in which this is done, such as through the regulation of practical reasoning and the cultivation of commitments to what is morally valuable.

3. ASPIRATIONS AND VIRTUE

Before considering the regulative role that ideals and aspirations play in practical reasoning, it is necessary to locate the concept of *aspiration* in relation to that of *virtue* since it might appear that a standard theory of virtue ethics captures much, if not all, of what a focus upon aspirations is intended to contribute to our understanding of morality, in particular, and value, in general. There are, however, important differences between a standard account of virtue ethics and an account of aspirations as part of a comprehensive moral theory.

The central difference pertains to diverging conceptions of a moral agent. A core assumption of an account that accords significance to aspirations within morality is that being subject to morality means, amongst other things, having reasons to strive to improve, that is, having aspirations to do better morally than we do at present. A person who deserves to be called a 'morally good person' is a person who, amongst other things, aspires as well as she can to be and to do better morally than she has done to this point and continues to do and to be able to do at present.[21] This conception of a morally good person as an aspirant contrasts sharply with the purported moral ideal that is the Virtuous Person, who is said to have a deeply entrenched, multifaceted mindset and disposition to act in the right way at the right time on the basis of the right reasons with the right attitude, intentions, and expectations. If it is appropriate to characterize the virtue ethicist's conception of the Virtuous Person in these terms as a possessor of 'full and perfect virtue'[22] who 'gets things right',[23] then such a creature seems to be, by her nature, incapable of having meaningful moral aspirations to do and be better than she has done and is and presently can do since, in her, such aspirations would be either incoherent (since

[21] As an aside, having aspirations to be and to do better morally may be an important part not only of being a morally good person, but also of being a well person. Having aspirations may plausibly be viewed as an essential element of individual flourishing and well-being.

[22] Cf. Rosalind Hursthouse 'Virtue Ethics', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta (Stanford, 2007), http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/.

[23] Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford, 1999), p. 13.

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she is perfectly virtuous) or disingenuous (which would show her to be less than perfectly virtuous).

A critic might respond that the Virtuous Person can have certain moral aspirations, such as an aspiration to continue to be virtuous since her habits and abilities might dull over time or her circumstances might change in ways that make it difficult or impossible for her to act virtuously (e.g. she might be knocked unconscious). Or, the critic might say, the Virtuous Person can have an aspiration to assist other people to achieve the state that she herself has achieved.[24] In reply, only the last of these is a plausible aspiration for the Virtuous Person to have. The other attitudes are not well-characterized as aspirations for such a being, nor are they necessarily attitudes she could have as ordinary desires. This is because the Virtuous Person would embody all of the virtuous habits, mindsets, and dispositions to which moral agents aspire, and hence the 'aspirations' just described are not evaluatively beyond her as such. Moreover, as a truly Virtuous Person, her mindset, habits, and disposition would not alter or diminish over time. Therefore, the Virtuous Person would not and could not have such an incoherent desire as to continue to be as she is since what she is is immutable. Undoubtedly, circumstances could affect how much a Virtuous Person could do; but there would be no comprehensive and constitutive *ideal* of greater virtue or practical wisdom for such a being to shape an aspiration around.

The virtue ethicist might then respond by rejecting a strong version of the unity of the virtues thesis in favour of an account of virtue that allows a person fully to realize one virtue without fully realizing all virtues. On that more modest account, a person-of-virtue could purportedly aspire to realize those virtues she presently lacks. Even then, however, my objection that this offers no meaningful model for moral agents remains, because a person who fully possesses a given virtue such as generosity or honesty (though she may lack other virtues) can have no aspiration to cultivate that virtue which she already possesses in full. This person-of-virtue may have aspirations relating to the particular virtues that she lacks (and may indeed have aspirations relating to other domains of moral value that are treated only derivatively under virtue ethics), but, by her very nature, she cannot have aspirations linked to the virtue that she fully possesses.

The Virtuous Person's lack of capacity for meaningful moral aspirations (and the person-of-virtue's lack of capacity for meaningful moral aspirations in relation to a given moral domain) makes her a poor model for moral agents to seek to emulate since she necessarily

[24] I thank Adam Cureton for outlining this line of objection.

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lacks what is shown below to be an important element of a morally good life – having aspirations. The implication of this is significant: the Virtuous Person so understood is not a meaningful moral ideal. In fact, there is a hint of the deeply impossible in the Virtuous Person since the nature and behaviour of such a creature in some respects defies the imagination. It is difficult to imagine either what precise form a being who possessed full and perfect virtue and consequently lacked moral aspirations would take or how such a being would conduct herself. In this respect, the Virtuous Person seems to resemble Robert Nozick's Utility Monster whose quality of life, as Parfit notes, must be millions of times higher than that of any human being if it is to offset the misery that this monster's destruction causes. Parfit observes that, as presented by Nozick, 'such a person is a deep impossibility . . . It seems a fair reply [to Nozick] that we cannot imagine, even in the dimmest way, the life of this Utility Monster.'[25] This does not imply that particular virtues either are meaningless or defy the imagination. We have no difficulty imagining what it means to be charitable or benevolent or generous. Where we do have difficulty is in conceiving of, as an ideal to which we should aspire, a creature who has so fully embodied either all of the virtues or a single virtue that she can have no meaningful aspirations (or even any ordinary desires) to improve in that regard.

One possible solution for the virtue ethicist might be to reject the claim that the Virtuous Person is to be seen as a model to be emulated by moral agents and to argue that the Virtuous Person is to be seen as an adviser whose observations on moral matters are to be attended to by moral agents. I have not the space to explore this proposal here, but I simply note that it seems unlikely that the Virtuous Person's pronouncements on moral matters would be intelligible as advice about either which ideals a moral agent should aspire to or, except in formal terms, how she should best cultivate those ideals.

A related difference between an account of aspirations within morality and a standard view of virtue ethics is that the former is both broader than the latter and better structured than the latter to give appropriate weight to the various distinctive categories that are central to morality. While moral aspirations can concern virtue, their focus is not restricted to the domain of virtue since they apply to as many distinct moral categories as the ideals that are their objects, including in addition to character, motivation and intention, action, goals, commitments, consequences, reflections, relationships, and, indeed, obligations as well as some aspirations themselves. Aspiration does not trump other moral categories, nor is an attitude of

[25] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, 1984), p. 389.

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aspiration the only appropriate attitudinal position that persons may adopt toward moral concerns. Nonetheless, the domain of aspiration is as broad and deep as the domain of morality itself. Like ideals, aspirations make an important contribution to morality. Elements of that contribution are examined in the following sections.

4. THE REGULATIVE ROLE OF IDEALS AND ASPIRATIONS

Several thinkers have identified ways in which ideals can regulate moral reasoning by serving as 'guideposts' (to use Rescher's phrase) in our deliberations about how to act and how best to actualize genuine values. Dorothy Emmet, for one, argues that certain ideals have a regulative role to play in setting standards for practical reason. Entertaining them, she says, even though, on her view, they are wholly unrealizable, gives orientation to our practices and prevents us from settling for surrogates.[26] In a similar vein, Rescher defends adopting and pursuing wholly unrealizable ideals on the grounds, first, that an ideal is a component element of a holistically unified, wider goal structure that incorporates other appropriate, achievable desiderata (and this validates the unrealizable ideal as something whose pursuit yields associated side benefits apart from those directly at issue in the ideal itself). Second, adopting and pursing an ideal can maximize actual achievement in circumstances where the adoption of more 'realistic' cognate goals would otherwise be less productive. Rescher states, 'The useful work of an ideal is to serve as a goad to effort by preventing us from resting complacently satisfied with the unhappy compromises demanded by the harsh realities of a difficult world.'[27]

Constrained by space, I shall not examine the merits of these defences of the regulative value of ideals. I simply note them in order to demonstrate that a case can be made for the distinctiveness of ideals as a moral category that plays a valuable role in practical reasoning. I also note these defences in order to highlight their limitation in one respect. The regulative value that these thinkers attribute to ideals cannot be understood independently of the regulative value of aspiring attitudes. As noble passions for excellence, our genuine aspirations both prompt us to endeavour to excel and sustain us in that endeavour, thereby furthering the practical possibilities for both the cultivation of value in general and the achievement of more specific, modest, and fully realizable goods which we might otherwise believe to be beyond us. Aiming wholeheartedly for the stars so that we may hit the ceiling often can be helpful and sometimes can be necessary. As Rescher and Coady

[26] Dorothy Emmet, *The Role of the Unrealisable* (Basingstoke, 1994), pp. 2–3.
[27] Rescher, *Ethical Idealism*, p. 83.

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both note, it seems to be a psychological fact about people that they can reach remarkably high levels of performance by aiming at a perfection or advanced state that they know or believe to be beyond them.[28] For an advanced state or ideal to play this regulative role in our practical reasoning, it must be supported by a particular attitudinal commitment toward it, specifically, that of aspiration. And the deep commitment and longing that comprise an aspiration can only be aroused when an ideal takes the imagination by storm. Thus, the regulative roles of ideals and aspirations are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

My comments here should not be read to imply that the only value of ideals and aspirations within practical reasoning lies in their regulative or instrumental role. It is consistent with what I have said here that persons have reasons to cultivate and to aspire to ideals *for the sake of those ideals themselves*, and not merely for the sake of realizing more mundane ends.[29] For our present purposes, though, it is sufficient to indicate that ideals and aspirations can play a regulative role in practical reasoning, as this serves to demonstrate their status as distinct and important moral categories. Both orienting our attention toward elements of value that we have reason to believe are unrealizable and cultivating a passionate commitment to realize them as fully as possible can enable us to focus our energies in ways that allow us better to realize important dimensions of value. If aspirations indeed have this effect upon our moral efforts, then this suggests that, in various contexts, we may have moral obligations to have particular moral aspirations.

5. OBLIGATIONS AND ASPIRATIONS

Aspirations interconnect with obligations in at least two respects, both of which reflect a broader interrelation between imagination and normativity. First, as noted in Section 1, some ideals – such as justice, peace, and truth – have a claim upon the attention of all persons even though some persons are better placed than others are to cultivate those ideals. Other ideals – such as parenting ideals – have a claim upon the attention of particular persons in virtue of those persons' positions or circumstances irrespective of those persons' desires and wishes. Consequently, even when a person's contribution to the cultivation of a given ideal would be modest, when that ideal has a claim upon her attention, she may be faulted *ceteris paribus* when she fails to have an aspiration to cultivate that ideal.[30] Let us consider a case in which an

[28] Cited from Coady, *Messy Morality*, p. 59.
[29] Cf. Brownlee, 'Reasons and Ideals'.
[30] The idea that a person can be faulted for not espousing certain ideals is discussed only briefly by Coady in *Messy Morality*.

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ideal has a claim to the attention of all. During the US civil rights era, white American moderates (as well as white racists and non-whites) who failed meaningfully to embrace and defend the public ideals of justice and political equality could have been faulted for not having such aspirations. It is not that white moderates simply failed in their duties to their fellow citizens. Rather, their failure was attributable, at least in part, to the fact that they did not aspire wholeheartedly to realize a singularly important set of public ideals. Political equality and justice are ideals to which white American moderates should have aspired during the civil rights period (as well as earlier, though, in all likelihood, at that time, the object of the aspiration rested even farther outside the confines of the real). If they had wholeheartedly adopted such aspirations as their own, this not only would have shaped and directed their conduct as citizens, but also may have expedited the transition toward greater equality and social justice in America.

This interconnection between aspiration and obligation should not be interpreted as a general observation about the nature of aspirations as such. Not all aspirations, and not even all moral aspirations, are obligatory. As noted in Section 1, often we may admire others' aspirations to realize genuine ideals without having reason to regard those aspirations as ones we ought to have ourselves. This holds true for certain dimensions of morality. For example, some of the moral aspirations that a new parent ought to have are not ones that non-parents ought to have. Respect for others' aspirations is compatible within a pluralistic framework with one's own cultivation of, and aspiration for, different valuable ideals that are incommensurable with other ideal pictures of life. A full account of aspirations within morality, which cannot be given here, necessarily will include an articulation and defence of the conditions under which a given ideal has either a claim to the attention of all or a claim to the attention of a particular person.

Second, given that it often is difficult, if not practically impossible, to act as we truly ought to act, our moral aspirations can appropriately include aspirations to honour those of our obligations that do not fall wholly within the confines of the real and the realizable. More specifically, the complexities and contingencies of human experience are such that it is often a genuine moral accomplishment to act even occasionally as we truly ought to act. If we consider our ordinary interactions with other persons, we see the countless ways in which we routinely are thoughtless toward others. The apparent near inevitability of this thoughtlessness implies that seemingly modest moral actions may be regarded as genuine moral accomplishments. For example, it is no mean moral accomplishment to show to the persons with whom we engage directly a meaningful degree of respect most of the time. Simply not letting our attention wander during our

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conversations with other persons, for example, is a mark of respect that we presumably owe to each other, but tend to find difficult to give and all too often fail to give. Such an accomplishment is noteworthy partly because it cultivates opportunities for us to flourish through genuinely worthwhile interaction.

Other seemingly modest moral obligations are appropriately understood as the objects of aspirations to act as we ought to act all things considered since they too cultivate and expand our own and others' opportunities to flourish, but often lie at the boundaries of what is realizable. Consider the following list of (overlapping) examples:

1. We have reason, perhaps even a categorical mandatory reason, to endeavour to cultivate our own and others' abilities to make novel connections and associations in important domains of value including moral value. In both formal and informal education settings, for example, we have reason to choose to exhort others (and ourselves) to reflect more closely upon how best to expand our moral parameters.
2. We have reason to bring notions of supererogation, good intentions, and virtuous action more fully within our own and others' moral compasses by conscientiously modelling meritorious conduct as best we can and by self-conscientiously cultivating honourable aims and intentions. Moreover, through acts of supererogation, we typically expand our moral scope since such acts tend to create opportunities for acquiring new moral obligations. Consider the difference between becoming a parent and not becoming a parent. There is no moral obligation as such to become a parent; but once we undertake to become parents, this creates new moral duties and, consequently, opens up avenues for moral development for our child and ourselves.
3. We have reason to explore novel ways of meaningfully relating to other people within our communities, families, and beyond, relationships that we are the poorer for not cultivating. The limits of our range of recognized meaningful relationships are set principally by the limits of our imaginations both to conceive of distinct types of valuable relationship and emotionally to enter into such relationships.
4. We have reason to cultivate a future-oriented awareness of, and sensitivity to, possibilities for moral development and exploration. This involves steadfastly reflecting upon how best to cultivate a full and rich moral life.

Each of these examples picks out a seemingly modest, yet important and difficult kind of moral undertaking, which together serve to show

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the extent to which 'mere' performance of duty may appropriately be brought within the parameters of moral aspiration.

The interrelation between aspiration and obligation reveals a broader connection between creativity and normative constraints. My claim here is not that creativity in moral aspiration must be subject to normative constraints so that any negative effects of unrestrained imagination might be avoided.[31] Rather, my claim is that creativity in moral aspiration reaches its fullest potential when it is undertaken within well-defined normative parameters. This point is made vivid through an analogy with the fine arts.

In disciplines such as opera and ballet, strict rules of conduct and attitude provide the framework necessary for the full development of creative talent in pursuit of a conception of aesthetic perfection. It is reported, for example, that when the fourteen-year-old Maria Callas was brought to Maria Trivella as a prospective pupil, Trivella described Callas's operatic soprano voice as follows:

> The tone of the voice was warm, lyrical, intense; it swirled and flared like a flame and filled the air with melodious reverberations like a carillon. It was by any standards an amazing phenomenon, or rather it was a great talent that needed control, technical training, and strict discipline in order to shine with all its brilliance.[32]

Similarly, in morality, there are great heights and depths of virtuosity to be realized, but they too require control, training, and strict discipline with reference to substantive norms, the forms of which are shaped by the nature of value.[33]

Achieving greatness in both moral aspiration and moral accomplishment requires the exercise of moral imagination in daydreaming, meditating, divergent and convergent thinking, visualizing future interactions with others, and reflecting upon past behaviour. These are cognitive activities that can be easily suppressed, but not so easily resuscitated. But, if the claims of this article are correct – that imagination is necessary for meaningful aspirations and that aspirations and ideals are central to morality and the practice of value – then it is incumbent upon moral agents to practise the art of moral imagination. That it is difficult to cultivate and sustain moral ingenuity in the aspirational sense makes the aspiration to cultivate such ingenuity itself a meaningful ideal to strive to acquire.

[31] Cf. Kekes, *Enlargement*.

[32] Nicholas Petsalis-Diomidis, *The Unknown Callas: The Greek Years* (New York, 2001), p. 96.

[33] For an examination of the nature of value, see Joseph Raz, *The Practice of Value* (Oxford, 2003); and Joseph Raz, *Value, Respect and Attachment* (Cambridge, 2001).

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How we characterize the central concerns of morality is important partly because this shapes our sense of how much the practices of imagination and mental cultivation matter. I maintain that imagination and creativity are essential to moral aspirations, and hence to morality, in at least two ways. The first lies in the nature of aspirations themselves. As steadfast commitments to, or deep longings for, genuine ideals, aspirations require us to hold within our minds those objects of the imagination that are our ideals. Second, such imaginative acts in turn help us to enlarge our appreciation for what we may be able to achieve in important domains of value. Creativity manifests itself in the actions that our moral aspirations inspire us to take. These actions, when they form constitutive contributions to the ideals that we espouse, enhance our own and others' opportunities to aspire to greater moral accomplishment. Both of these manifestations of creativity and imagination expand the realm of practical moral possibility by making practically possible for us, through our increased sense of that possibility, what before may have been possible at most in principle.

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