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Perfectly Frictionless Planes: The Unexpected Key to Unlocking Nonideal Theory

In the pursuit of a perfect society, we may be tempted to ignore the racism, sexism, and conflict that plague our current world. Unfortunately, while working toward equality without acknowledging discrimination may seem pleasant, it is hardly effective. In his 2005 paper “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology,” Charles W. Mills argues that in order to restructure society to serve the marginalized, theorists should analyze society’s current form rather than relying solely on a theoretical vision of utopia. Mills introduces his argument with a highly abstract metaphor of a plane, which seems out of place for an essay focused on speaking hard truths. However, by initially using the plane to illustrate the flaws in ideal theory, Mills sets up a framework by which one can critically assess applications of ideal theory to human constructs. Mills’s use of metaphor allows him to demonstrate and ultimately prove the merit of nonideal theory.

Mills lays the foundation of his argument that ideal theory cannot effectively produce social change by establishing a basic metaphor for ideal modeling with inanimate objects. Two types of models exist: the ideal-as-idealized, which models the ideal phenomenon “P,” and the ideal-as-descriptive, which models P as it currently is. Mills likens an ideal-as-descriptive model of P to a model of a plane. This model plane might be “very smooth, Teflon-coated [and] suspended in a vacuum” (167). Mills appeals to the reader’s visual and tactile senses in order to ground the highly theoretical concept of the ideal-as-descriptive in real life. He then reveals that in this scenario, the ideal-as-idealized model is “an ideal frictionless plane” (167). In introducing

these two examples, Mills establishes his primary metaphor of two different planes as two different types of models. Using this initial image alone, one might come to the logical conclusion that ideal-as-descriptive models such as the Teflon-coated plane are always negligibly different from the ideal, the frictionless plane. This is an argument that Mills will later refute. Though Mills has set up his metaphor with the two planes, it does not yet demonstrate the benefits of separating ideal-as-idealized and ideal-as-descriptive models.

Mills then goes on to modify his metaphor and thus its implications for ideal theory. He introduces a second imaginary plane, this time covered with Velcro, “pitted [and] cracked” (167). Here, the physical illustration of the new plane sharpens its differences from the original. By altering the new plane, Mills also changes the logical conclusion that his metaphor supports. In the case of the Velcro plane, it would be “absurd” to model it as a plane that only deviates from the ideal frictionless plane (167). Clearly, it models something else entirely. Thus, Mills demonstrates how an ideal-as-descriptive model might *not* be negligibly different from the ideal-as-idealized model. Mills modifies his metaphor to demonstrate why theorists should not overlook ideal-as-descriptive models in favor of their ideal-as-idealized counterparts.

Mills expands upon this conclusion that ideal-as-descriptive models can differ from ideal-as-idealized models to outline an alternative strategy to ideal theory. He argues that, due to the gap between descriptive and idealized models, “if one wants to change the actual [plane] so it conforms...to the ideal [plane],” he must take into account the plane’s imperfect properties rather than viewing them as mere departures from the perfectly frictionless plane’s structure (167). By introducing the goal of changing the plane, Mills explains the correct way to go about modeling: treating the ideal-as-descriptive model as a separate and relevant entity. This final expansion of the metaphor clarifies how the gap between different types of modeling matters for

situations of social change. For instance, later in his essay Mills argues that it cannot “serve the interests of people of color to ignore the centuries of white supremacy” (172). If one wants to eliminate systematic racism, it is essential to acknowledge and work with the racism that already exists in social institutions. Mills’s initial argument for using the ideal-as-descriptive model to change the plane mirrors this real-world example. By establishing, modifying, and expanding his metaphor, Mills logically illustrates the narrowness of ideal theory and proposes a more inclusive and effective approach to modeling.

After putting forth his metaphor, Mills goes on to explain how ideal-as-idealized modeling changes when applied to human constructs. If one juxtaposes these new applications of ideal theory with the plane metaphor, she can better understand how Mills uses them to challenge ideal theory. Mills first explains that in an ideal-as-idealized scenario, humans must exhibit character values that most people have not fully developed. He describes these as “human capacities significantly deviant from the norm” (167-168). This unattainable expectation means that when dealing with people, all ideal-as-descriptive models inherently differ from ideal-as-idealized theory. If one recalls Mills’s plane metaphor, she will remember that only the Teflon-coated, near-ideal plane was close enough to the ideal-as-idealized model to justify employing ideal theory. Adding humans to the equation makes the existence of such a plane unlikely. By adjusting the plane metaphor to account for human limitations, one can see that Mills’s first point about human modeling eliminates the primary redeeming argument for ideal theory. Therefore, by clarifying that near-ideal ideal-as-descriptive models rarely exist for humans, Mills furthers his argument against dependence on ideal-as-idealized models.

Mills then outlines an additional way in which humans complicate idealization, again inviting the reader to apply and adjust his metaphor to expose the flaws of ideal theory. In an

ideal-as-idealized model, everything is as it “should be” according to the particular theorist’s view of ethics and justice (168). This complication results in the creation of several different ideal-as-idealized models. In Mills’s plane metaphor, only one ideal-as-idealized model exists because a perfectly frictionless plane has a definite set of properties. Human institutions, on the other hand, are not so clearly defined. For instance, different theorists may disagree on the characteristics of a perfectly just legal system, leading to the creation of several ideal-as-idealized models. It seems much less practical to rely solely on an ideal-as-idealized depiction of P once one realizes that no single such model exists. Thus, Mills portrays ideal-as-idealized theory as an increasingly unreliable methodology. By first providing readers with the plane metaphor, he gives them the tools to critically analyze ideal theory in human contexts and understand exactly where it fails.

Rather than solely focusing on why moral philosophers should utilize nonideal theory, Mills uses the plane metaphor to describe how ideal theory is ineffective. By addressing the flaws of the current social norm, Mills adheres to his own thesis. When Mills constructs the metaphor with the two planes, he does so to illustrate how solely relying on ideal-as-idealized models does not allow for change: “if the plane is covered not with Teflon, but Velcro...then [to follow ideal theory] would be absurd” (167). Mills uses this example to point out a flaw in many philosophers’ approaches to theory. In doing so, he avoids “marginalization...of the actual” (168), the misstep that distinguishes ideal theory. Had he chosen instead to follow ideal theory, Mills would have argued directly for the inclusion of ideal-as-descriptive models without demonstrating how their exclusion is a problem. With his plane metaphor, Mills supports nonideal theory by acknowledging the flaws of ideal theory and not skipping ahead to his own vision for correct modeling.

By exemplifying nonideal theory with his plane metaphor, Mills not only avoids hypocrisy, but constructs a strong argument that demonstrates how such theory is useful for effecting change. For instance, when Mills argues that “idealization involves the attribution to the agents...of human capacities significantly deviant from the norm” (167-168), he is simply stating a fact about idealization. However, this statement becomes a criticism of ideal theory if one applies it to the plane metaphor. Thus, by creating a space in which imperfection exists, Mills gives his readers another tool to understand his argument. This is similar to the strategy that he hopes ethical theorists will adopt in modeling the real world. For example, he warns that ideal theory conceptualizes “social institutions...in ideal-as-idealized-model terms, with little or no sense of how their actual workings may systematically disadvantage women, the poor, and racial minorities” (169). If one conceptualizes something like a wage without acknowledging the gender pay gap, he will overlook a key roadblock to achieving economic equality. The logic is the same in Mills’s essay: If readers conceptualize the human capacity for ideal morals without acknowledging the limitations of ideal theory, they will fail to understand how that aspect of human idealization creates a practical issue for ideal-as-idealized modeling. Therefore, Mills creates space for ideal theory and its flaws to exist within his plane metaphor in order to build a strong logical foundation for his essay. His argument for the merits of nonideal theory not only makes use of such theory, but actively illustrates how it is effective.

In his attempt to prove the value of nonideal theory, Mills constructs a metaphor that demonstrates how ideal theory would fail to improve a plane, then allows readers to apply the metaphor to human constructs in order to introduce additional defects of ideal theory. By engaging with a depiction of a flawed theory, Mills succeeds not only in critiquing a common error of his contemporaries, but in actually demonstrating the strategy that he proposes.

Ultimately, it is this use of nonideal theory that allows him to make his argument. Mills opens his essay with a metaphor in order to smoothly transition to his broader points about ideal theory's flaws. Those assertions, in turn, support his later examples of the modeling of real social institutions. The necessity of each of these steps reminds readers that Mills is not at all against the abstract—in fact, he is decidedly for it. Only when mistaken for reality does theory become problematic.

On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized information regarding this work, I have followed and will continue to observe all regulations regarding it, and I am unaware of any violation of the Honor Code by others.

Works Cited

Mills, Charles W. “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology.” *Hypatia*, vol. 20, no. 3, Summer 2005, pp. 165-184. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3811121>.