

Against the Ideal Human: A Theory of Bounded Striving

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Abstract

The figure of the “ideal human” has long shaped philosophical thought: the perfectly rational agent, the morally consistent self, the harmoniously ordered soul. Today, this figure has escaped the confines of theory to become an implicit normative benchmark. Algorithmic scoring systems, educational analytics, wellness economies, and enhancement discourse increasingly measure people against templates of optimized performance, flawless reasoning, and moral purity. I argue that the ideal human is both conceptually unstable and ethically dangerous. By demanding perfection, it obscures the ambiguity through which genuine agency develops. It transforms moral equality into hierarchies of merit and legitimates exclusionary or technocratic forms of governance. Drawing on Aristotle, Kant, Rawls, Sandel, Habermas, and contemporary cognitive science, I advance an alternative model: humans as bounded strivers whose value emerges from limitation and aspirational effort. Rejecting the ideal human is not a rejection of aspiration but a reclamation of ethical agency. This reframing carries practical implications for AI ethics, educational evaluation, and enhancement practices, offering guidance for institutions that seek to respect human dignity.

1. Introduction

Philosophical traditions have long entertained visions of perfection: Aristotle’s magnanimous individual, the Stoic sage, Kant’s autonomous rational being. These figures historically served as conceptual tools, illustrating the outer edges of human virtue or reason. Today, the ideal human has migrated from the realm of moral theory into the architecture of modern life. Corporations model the “ideal worker” with oppressive productivity; universities track “ideal learning trajectories” with predictive analytics; wellness platforms define the “ideal body”; and AI research often treats the bias-free, perfectly rational agent as a design goal.¹

At the center of these developments is an image of a human seldom explicitly described but widely enforced. The “ideal human” is imagined to respond flawlessly across moral, emotional, and practical domains; unerring in judgment, morally incorruptible, perpetually composed, and effortlessly competent. Philosophically, this figure resembles a composite of the virtuous sage and the perfectly rational agent; institutionally, it is a silent behavioral template

¹ Sandel, Michael J. *The Case Against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3–6.

against which humans are measured. Hidden in the illusion of guidance, this figure only serves as a disciplinary norm that delegitimizes the vulnerabilities essential to agency.

This paper proceeds in three parts. First, I argue that the ideal human undermines agency by collapsing the space of deliberation. Second, I show that it erodes moral equality by embedding hierarchy into the very structure of evaluation. Third, I examine how idealized norms become socially and technologically operationalized, producing exclusion and injustice. Finally, I propose bounded striving as a realistic, ethically supported alternative.

2. The Ideal Human as a Threat to Agency

A core problem is that the ideal human presumes maximal predictability. Credit scoring algorithms, employee-monitoring software, and academic analytics often equate predictability with responsibility, and in these cases, worth.² Yet predictability does not equate to autonomy. A person who acts with uniformly optimized behavior simply follows a predetermined trajectory rather than making choices. Kant emphasizes that self-legislation is the basis of autonomy, not mechanical rule compliance.³ Cognitive science further supports deliberation's emergent nature, shaped by ambiguity and contextual sensitivity.⁴

Even fictional exemplars like Superman, often invoked as “ideal men,” become ethically instructive only when they fail or confront conflict. A literally perfect Superman would be narratively inert. Agency depends on friction and the capacity for error.

Aristotle observes that ethical virtue involves habituation amidst tension and uncertainty. Essentially, courage exists because danger is real; patience exists because frustration is real; mercy exists because misinterpretation is possible.⁵ A perfectly optimized moral agent *cannot* cultivate virtue, because nothing in their world calls for mental negotiation and struggle. Cognitive science underscores that human judgment operates through bounded rationality. Many factors have a role in the decision-making process, involving emotional regulation and context-dependent inference. Therefore, adaptive moral judgment relies on sensitivity to error and feedback.⁶ Experimental studies in decision-making show that exposure

² Kahneman, Daniel. *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 215–220.

³ Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 40–45.

⁴ Gigerenzer, Gerd. *Gut Feelings: The Intelligence of the Unconscious* (New York: Viking, 2007), 22–24.

⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 110–112, Book II, Chapters 4–5.

⁶ Tversky, Amos & Kahneman, Daniel. “Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases,” *Science* 185, no. 4157 (1974): 1126–1127.

to uncertainty and feedback improves moral and practical reasoning, confirming that human error is a crucial medium for ethical growth.⁷

3. How the Ideal Human Collapses Moral Equality

Rawls insists moral equality is prior to social or economic evaluation,⁸ yet the ideal human implicitly converts comparison into moral ranking. Those closest to the ideal are perceived as more disciplined and responsible. Algorithmic hiring, educational analytics, and health metrics reinforce this hierarchy, making proximity to the ideal the equivalent to merit.⁹ For example, university predictive analytics rank students on potential performance trajectories and implicitly reward those who conform to narrow expectations, disadvantaging non-linear learners.

Kantian and Habermasian frameworks argue that respect is owed unconditionally to persons as moral agents.¹⁰ However, institutionalized ideals transform respect into conditional valuation as those who align with behavioral norms and productivity thresholds are deemed “deserving,” while others are devalued. Conditional respect corrodes the social fabric of moral community. In corporate settings, managers publicly praise employees meeting strict productivity metrics, while those requiring flexible schedules or other accommodations may be subtly marginalized. This demonstrates the social consequences of conditional valuation.

4. Ethical Distortions of the Ideal Human

First, holding perfection as a standard portrays divergence (disability, neurodiversity, cultural difference) as deviation requiring correction.¹¹ Benevolent interventions often reproduce this logic. This is detrimental because they imply that one is expected to approximate an ideal rather than developing as one is. For example, standardized testing or wellness programs often disadvantage neurodivergent students or people whose cognitive or bodily differences do not align with normative metrics.

Second, transhumanist rhetoric presents enhancement as universally beneficial, yet access and efficacy remain stratified. Cognitive enhancers, performance technologies, and

⁷ Gigerenzer, Gerd. *Gut Feelings: The Intelligence of the Unconscious* (New York: Viking, 2007), 50–55.

⁸ Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 20–25.

⁹ Sandel, Michael J. *The Case Against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 27–30.

¹⁰ Habermas, Jürgen. *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 85–90.

¹¹ Sandel, Michael J. *The Case Against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 45–50.

cutting-edge therapies advantage those already near the ideal, not those far away. Sandel warns that enhancement threatens the appreciation of unbidden goods; the ideal human intensifies this risk by framing enhancement as moral obligation.¹²

Third, AI ethics often treats inconsistency as a flaw to correct. But moral judgment requires a multitude of factors including empathy, context, and revision. A perfectly consistent AI may be reliable, but it is not moral. Designing “ideal agents” exposes the incoherence of the ideal itself because morality without fallibility is not morality; it is a hollow architecture.¹³ AI systems designed for bias-free decision-making may inadvertently erase context-sensitive moral judgments, producing outcomes that are ‘consistent’ but ethically impoverished, as in certain predictive policing tools.

5. Humans as Bounded Strivers

Human beings do not flourish *in spite of* their limits but *through* them. We are limited, vulnerable, interpretive, and historically situated, yet within these bounds, we strive and revise and collaborate. Within boundaries, people revise their judgments based on changes in context. Error signifies that thought and character remain open to development.¹⁴

Bounded striving reframes flourishing as a continual process rather than a march toward perfection. It locates dignity not in approximating an ideal, but in the capacity to participate in shared moral worlds that emphasize continual adaptation. On this view, value arises from responsiveness, not from meeting predetermined standards.

As a practical orientation, bounded striving encourages iterative goal-setting as well as reflective evaluation. It favors openness to revision over rigid adherence to fixed ideals or algorithmically imposed norms. Instead of treating humans as failed versions of an abstract perfection, it understands them as agents whose strength lies in their ability to learn.

6. A Worked Example

Consider a teacher navigating a disruptive classroom. Institutional frameworks increasingly model the “ideal teacher” as someone perfectly regulated and anticipatory. Yet real classrooms are unpredictable. Relations are complex. Misreading a situation, overreacting, or making any sort of small mistake does not constitute moral failure; it constitutes engagement,

¹² Sandel, Michael J. *The Case Against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 75-78.

¹³ Kahneman, Daniel. *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 300-305.

¹⁴ Gigerenzer, Gerd. *Gut Feelings: The Intelligence of the Unconscious* (New York: Viking, 2007), 102-106.

that willingness to actively interact with the domain where growth occurs. Excellence should depend on reflective adjustment wherever possible rather than on flawless response.¹⁵

7. Broader Implications

Viewing humans as *bounded strivers* reshapes how we evaluate intelligence, responsibility, and moral standing. If agency arises through constraint rather than in spite of it, then vulnerability and limitation are not deficits but the conditions that make accountability possible. Regarding AI and ethical design, rejecting the ideal human will push AI ethics toward flexibility. This point of view will emphasize supportive argumentation and accommodate for uncertainty. Practically, this could mean designing AI that flags uncertainty and solicits human judgment rather than enforcing automated ‘ideal’ decisions. Considering enhancement ethics, avoiding perfection as a normative standard will discourage technocratic eugenics, allowing for the development of diverse trajectories in humanity.

From a social philosophy perspective, bounded striving grounds resistance to optimization regimes. It refutes surveillance and conditional respect, instead highlighting how people engage with uncertainty and are able to revise themselves over time. Bounded striving suggests that ethical and civic institutions should cultivate environments that support revision and dialogue rather than punish deviation from rigid norms. It reframes human development not as a race toward completeness, but as an evolving practice to be shared.

8. Objections and Replies

Some may object that ideals inspire motivation. I argue that this is true only when they are aspirational ideals, because algorithms and institutional standards convert ideals into coercion. Another potential objection is that the ideal human is purely metaphorical, not meant to be brought into the “real” world. However, once enacted in evaluation, policy, or AI design, these metaphors acquire material consequences. Others may say that perfection guides enhancement and AI design. My response to this is that ethical design requires plural aims. When measuring perfection, complex values like autonomy, empathy, and justice all collapse into a single metric, unsuitable for evaluation. Lastly, a fear is that bounded striving cannot scale institutionally. However, policies emphasizing reflective practices, iterative feedback, and plural metrics can preserve human discretion while guiding collective goals.

9. Conclusion

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999)

The aspiration to model human life around a perfected figure has always carried a quiet violence because it narrows the field of what counts as a worthwhile way to live, and it subtly marks ordinary experience as a kind of failure. Once the figure of the ideal human is removed, the landscape changes. The textures of real life, including hesitation, recalibration, uneven commitment, shifting motivations, are revealed as the necessary foundations of agency.

We see a more accurate picture of the self when we stop measuring ourselves against distant images of seamless discipline or total self-command. Meaning grows from the small negotiations people make with their circumstances. From absorbing pressure, revising aims, and leaning into uncertainty. This is where lives take their shape, in the slow accumulation of choices shaped by context, not in the emulation of an abstract template.

What stands out in the end is not a perfected form, but the complexity of people trying to live well without a script. The ethical weight of that effort is enough to sustain a more humane understanding of what it means to be a person. In turn, the ideal human recedes, and in its place emerges a picture of life that can finally make room for the full depth of our striving.

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