During the analysis phase of a qualitative study that examined family surrogate decision-making in the context of critical illness, a question regarding the use of ethics theory emerged. Principlism, the chosen theoretical framework of the study, could not adequately explain the participants’ responses. Virtue ethics was a fit with some data but was inadequate. Deontological theory was a fit with other data but was also inadequate. The overarching question: Can ethics theory provide a sound basis for clinical practice? Clinicians face ethical issues on a daily basis. These include not only clinical decisions, but provided guidance to patients and families in the shared decision-making process. The ethics training of most clinicians consists of a cursory version of Principlism. More extensive ethics education or expert ethics consultations might be helpful if advanced knowledge of ethics theory could inform clinical decision-making and practice. The presenter will argue the limitations of ideal theory as applied to moral decision-making in clinical practice. Analysis of this disconnect between the ideal and the real will be presented. Finally, practical recommendations for the role of ethics theory in clinical practice will be discussed.