

Course Summary

Moral Theory
Michaelmas Term 22/23
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Office Hours: Wednesday 11-2 (drop in, no appointment)

Course Summary

A moral theory is a theory that's meant to guide your actions. It's meant to tell you what to do. We will be thinking about the broad shape of a moral theory. What might a theory of this kind look like? We will mostly be focusing on one sub-part of this: what makes one outcome (of an action) better or worse than another?

Here's a summary. The lecture notes and suggested readings are divided in this four-part fashion.

- i. Side Constraints and Trolley Problems*
We introduce the idea that standard moral theories evaluate actions based on both the consequences of our actions and 'side constraints'; and use the trolley problem to introduce two candidate side-constraints, the doctrine of double-effect and the killing/letting die distinction.
- ii. Axiology (I): Equality and Desert*
What makes one outcome or consequence of an action better than another? We start by thinking about whether a more equal outcome is, in any respect, a better one. This will get us thinking about whether an outcome can be better even if it is better for nobody.
- iii. Axiology (II): The Non-Identity Problem*
In an attempt to answer the question of whether an outcome can be better even if it is better for nobody we take on 'the non-identity problem'; a famous philosophical problem about the nature of our duties to future people.
- iv. Impersonal Axiology*
If, as the non-identity problem suggests, an outcome can be better without being better for anyone, axiology must be 'impersonal'. But what does this look like? We study some of the paradoxes and problems of impersonal axiology, focusing on 'the repugnant conclusion'.

We probably won't cover material from all four of these sections. It's too much. But I want to see what people are interested in and where in-class discussion takes us before deciding which we will focus on. We'll certainly start with the material on side-constraints and trolleys.

What I find most interesting in all of this is iii and iv. This material is covered in one of the classic works of contemporary moral philosophy:

- Derek Parfit. *Reasons and Persons*. (Oxford University Press 1984). Part IV.

I'd recommend that everyone takes a look at this, even if at nothing else.