

## PY5319: Topics in Recent Moral Philosophy —The Contributory and the Overall—

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At least since W.D. Ross's *The Right and the Good* was published in 1930, philosophers working in moral theory—and normative theory more broadly—have been attracted to a certain picture of the structure of the normative domain. First, we draw a distinction between contributory normative concepts and overall or all-things-considered normative concepts. The paradigmatic contributory concept is that of a reason, but there may be others. A contributory, or *pro tanto*, reason for or against an action or attitude favors the action or attitude to some degree, but may not settle the issue on its own. This is because there may be conflicting reasons that support alternatives. In fact, this possibility of conflict is a large part of what is attractive about this kind of picture, and certainly is part of what attracted Ross.

Paradigmatic examples of overall normative concepts include the deontic concepts *ought*, *requirement*, and *permission*, and perhaps even *right* or *wrong*. There are also evaluative examples: the concept of the *best* alternative, of one alternative being *better than* another, or of something being *valuable*. Other examples include the concept of a belief being *justified* and of an action or attitude being *rational*.

So this distinction between the contributory and the overall is the first important part of this picture. The second—embedded in the names we've given to these categories—is the claim that the contributory considerations (e.g., the reasons) bearing on some action or attitude somehow determine the overall status of the action or attitude. So, for example, a ubiquitous claim is that what you ought to do is just what you have most reason to do. The reasons for and against the alternatives somehow interact to generate a conclusion about what you ought to do, all things considered. Similarly, many philosophers think that the overall evaluative status of something is determined, somehow, by the contribution of various contributory moral factors.

This module investigates the foundations of this picture, and explores applications within recent moral theory. Central questions may include: How exactly do contributory considerations interact with each other? How does this interaction determine the overall status of the action or attitude? Does appealing to a notion of normative weight help to answer these questions? If so, what does the weight of a reason consist in? Does accepting this picture require accepting a “reasons first” conception of normativity, on which reasons (or other contributory considerations) are conceptually and perhaps metaphysically prior to overall concepts? Do contributory considerations or factors combine in a straightforward “additive” way, or in some more complicated way? If some more complicated way, does this have any implications for structural features of overall concepts—for example, do features of the interactions between contributory moral factors lead to intransitivity of *better than*?

**Text:**

There is no required text for this course; readings will be made available online, many through eBooks from the university library.

**Requirements:**

1. You are required to do the *assigned readings* before the seminar each week, and come prepared to discuss them. You are also strongly encouraged to do at least some of the supplementary readings.
2. There is one *essay* for the course, due Monday, 7 December, 2015. It must be no more than 5,000 words.
3. In addition, you must submit an *essay plan* no later than three weeks before the essay is due—so, by Monday, 16 November, 2015. This will not be marked, but you are required to submit it in order to receive a mark on your essay.

**Schedule of topics and readings:**

This schedule is tentative, and the lecturers reserve the right to make adjustments. You will be given plenty of notice of any changes.

Week 1: Introduction

This week we’ll introduce the main idea to be examined in this module, that there is a distinction between contributory normative concepts and overall normative concepts, where the contributory considerations bearing on some action or attitude determine its overall normative status.

Main readings:

- W.D. Ross, [The Right and the Good, Chapter 2](#)

- Jonathan Dancy, [Ethics Without Principles, Chapters 2-3](#)

Supplementary readings (esp. if you are unfamiliar with normative reasons):

- Derek Parfit, [On What Matters, Vol. 1, Chapter 1](#)
- Mark Schroeder, [Slaves of the Passions, Chapter 1](#)
- John Broome, [Reasons](#)
- Roger Crisp, [Keeping things simple](#)

## Week 2: Reasons first

Many philosophers think that reasons are the fundamental normative concept, and can be used to explain all others. We will examine some of the motivations and challenges for this *reasons first* view.

Main readings:

- Matthew Bedke, [Passing the deontic buck](#)
- Mark Schroeder, [The ubiquity of state-given reasons](#)

Supplementary readings:

- Pamela Hieronymi, [The wrong kind of reason](#)
- Derek Parfit, [Rationality and reasons](#)
- Snedegar, [Reasons, oughts, and requirements](#)

## Week 3: Additivity

This week we will explore contextual interactions between reasons and values, including objections to the view that the strength of a reason to do *X and Y* is the sum of the strength of the reasons to do *X* and the reasons to do *Y*, each considered in isolation.

Main readings:

- Shelly Kagan, [The additive fallacy](#)
- Campbell Brown, [Two kinds of holism about values](#)

Supplementary readings:

- Tom Hurka, [Two kinds of organic unity](#)
- Erik Carlson, [Organic unities, non-trade-off, and the additivity of intrinsic value](#)

## Week 4: Competition between reasons, 1

This week we will think in more detail about how to cash out the idea that the overall normative status of an action is determined by the normative reasons bearing on it. The main idea here is that this is done via *competition* between reasons; we'll think about ways to try to understand what this could amount to.

Main readings:

- Shyam Nair, [‘How do reasons accrue?’](#)
- Joshua Gert, [‘Normative strength and the balance of reasons’](#)

Supplementary readings:

- Patricia Greenspan, [‘Asymmetrical practical reasons’](#)
- Mark Schroeder, [‘What makes reasons sufficient?’](#)
- Justin Snedegar, ‘Reasons for and reasons against’ (maybe...)

#### Week 5: Competition between reasons, 2

We'll continue thinking about how reasons compete to determine the overall normative status of an action or attitude. We'll mainly focus on a recent innovation: Horty's *reasons as defaults* theory.

Main readings:

- John Horty, [‘Reasons as Defaults, Chapters 1-2’](#)

Supplementary readings:

- Horty, [‘Reasons as Defaults, Chapters 5-6’](#)
- Horty and Nair, [‘The logic of reasons’](#)

#### Week 6: Incommensurable values and reasons

This week we will explore various sorts of incommensurabilities in value and reasons—including incomparability, indeterminacy (or vagueness), parity, imprecision, and rough comparability.

Main readings:

- Ruth Chang, [‘Value incomparability and incommensurability’](#)
- Erik Carlson, [‘Vagueness, incomparability, and the collapsing principle’](#)

Supplementary readings:

- Ruth Chang, [‘The possibility of parity’](#)
- John Broome, [‘Is incommensurability vagueness?’](#)

#### Week 7: Intransitivity and spectrum arguments

This week we will look at one type of argument for the view that the ‘better than’ relation (as well as the ‘more reason to choose than’ relation) is not transitive. For example, consider a series of plausible claims: two years of torture is better than 10 years of slightly less intense pain, which is better than 100 years of slightly less intense pain, and so on... all the way down to very mild pain. If ‘better than’ were transitive, these claims would together imply that two years of torture is better than a bazillion years of very mild pain.

Main readings:

- Larry Temkin, [Rethinking the Good](#), Chapters 2 and 6

Supplementary readings:

- Larry Temkin, [Rethinking the Good](#), Chapters 5 and 9
- Stuart Rachels, [‘Counterexamples to the transitivity of better than’](#)
- Derek Parfit, ‘Towards theory X’ (will be emailed to you)

#### Week 8: Intransitivity and person-affecting views

According to person-affecting views, outcomes are better only if they’re better for people. These views (arguably) give rise to a form of intransitivity. This week we’ll explore these views and this form of intransitivity—whether we can avoid it and whether it’s acceptable.

Main readings:

- Larry Temkin, [Rethinking the Good](#), Chapters 11 and 12

Supplementary readings:

- M.A. Roberts, [‘Temkin’s essentially comparative view, wrongful life, and the mere addition paradox’](#)
- Temkin, [‘Rethinking the good: A reply to my critics’ \(Part 2\)](#)
- Temkin, [‘Intransitivity and the mere addition paradox’](#)

#### Week 9: Dilemma avoidance

This week we will turn to the question of whether intransitivity of ‘better than’ results in moral or practical dilemmas (i.e., situations in which each and every one of an agent’s available acts is all-things-considered wrong or rationally impermissible). Can ‘breakdowns’ at the *all-things-considered* normative level be avoided when they occur within various factors that contribute to the former?

Main readings:

- Larry Temkin, [Rethinking the Good](#), Chapters 14.7 and 14.8
- Jacob Ross, [‘Rethinking the person-affecting principle’](#)
- Timothy Campbell, ‘Practical reasoning without transitivity’ (will be emailed to you)

Supplementary readings:

- Temkin, [‘Rethinking Rethinking the Good’](#) (response to Ross)
- Gerard Vong, ‘Making betterness behave: constructing a transitive deontic ordering from a non-transitive axiological ordering’ (will be emailed to you)
- Arntzenius, Elga, and Hawthorne, [‘Bayesianism, infinite decisions, and binding’](#)

#### Week 10: Reasons and rationality

We will examine whether the notion of *rationality* can be explained in terms of reasons. Some have argued for certain requirements of rationality that cannot be understood in terms of reasons. We will also examine whether the demands of rationality are normative—that is, whether they are reason-providing—in the way that philosophers since Socrates have wondered whether morality was normative.

Main readings:

- Mark Schroeder, [‘Means-end coherence, stringency, and subjective reasons’](#)
- Jonathan Way, [‘The normativity of rationality’](#)

Supplementary readings:

- Niko Kolodny, [‘Why be rational?’](#)
- John Broome, [‘Normative requirements’](#)

#### Week 11: Skepticism about reasons

Some philosophers are skeptical of the turn to reasons, and doubt whether thinking of normativity solely, or even primarily, in terms of reasons is correct. We will examine some motivations for this kind of skepticism.

Main readings:

- Kate Manne, ‘Doubts about reasons-talk’ (Coming soon...)
- Ralph Wedgwood, [‘The pitfalls of ‘reasons’](#)”

Supplementary readings:

- Pekka Väyrynen, [‘A wrong turn to reasons?’](#)
- Daniel Fogal, [‘Reasons, reason, and context’](#)