

PY5319: Topics in Recent Moral Philosophy

Structure of Normativity

Lecturers:

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Description:

This module explores various questions about the structure of the normative domain—the domain concerned with what we have reason to do, ought to do, and so on. These include questions about the nature of different normative properties and concepts, how they interact with the context, and especially how they interact with one another. A large part of the module will focus on interactions between normative reasons—considerations that somehow count in favor of acting in a certain way or having a certain attitude. In particular, we will investigate the ways in which reasons interact and compete to determine what we ought to do, all things considered. This will involve discussion of when we have reason to act in certain ways, as well as how to determine the *weight* of those reasons. This is important for determining which of a range of potential actions the reasons we have *most* reason to do, and so is clearly relevant for ethics and normative philosophy more generally.

We will also explore similar kinds of questions about the nature and structure of *value*. For example, states of affairs have various aspects that are evaluatively relevant. There is thus a question of how these aspects interact to determine the overall value of the state of affairs. This is crucial for evaluating which of a range of potential states of affairs is the *best*, and so clearly relevant for ethics and normative philosophy more generally.

So, though many of the questions we'll address most directly are fairly abstract, they are directly relevant for first-order normative theorizing. We will explore some of these implications of views about the structure of normativity for more traditional first-order ethical questions.

Text:

Many readings will come from *Weighing Reasons*, edited by Errol Lord and Barry Maguire, Oxford University Press, 2016. You can purchase a hardcopy if you'd like, but there is also access through the university library via Oxford Scholarship Online [here](#). Other readings will be provided via email or MMS.

Requirements:

1. You are required to do the **assigned readings** before the seminar each week, and come prepared to discuss them. You are also expected to do at least some of the **supplementary readings**. The seminars will be discussion-based, so it is your responsibility to come prepared to contribute to the discussion. This, of course, means that it is your responsibility to come to all eleven seminars, unless you have a very good excuse. You should not stop coming to seminars once you have decided on an essay topic.

2. There is one **essay** for the course, due **Monday, 5 December at noon**. It must be no more than 5,000 words. This will be on a topic of your choosing, but (of course) it must relate to material from the module.
3. In addition, you must submit an **essay plan** no later than three weeks before the essay is due—so, by **Friday, 11 November at noon**. 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, based on the interests and pace of the class. You will be given plenty of notice of any changes.

Many of the readings are linked to below. Some will be made available on MMS. Readings marked “(WR)” are from the *Weighing Reasons* volume.

Week 1: Introduction

This week we'll introduce one of the main ideas 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](#)
- Lord and Maguire, 'An opinionated guide to the weight of reasons' (WR)

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

- Maria Alvarez, ['Reasons for action: justification, motivation, explanation'](#)
- 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, including ought and value. We will examine some of the motivations and challenges for this *reasons first* view. The first kind of challenge is more structural: is there a way to analyze other normative properties or concepts in terms of reasons? The second is more substantive: some reasons are intuitively of the *wrong kind*; this causes a problem for reasons-based analyses of value.

Main readings:

- Matthew Bedke, ['Passing the deontic buck'](#)
- John Broome, ['Reasons versus ought'](#)

Supplementary readings:

- Pamela Hieronymi, ['The wrong kind of reason'](#)

- Derek Parfit, [‘Rationality and reasons’](#)
- Mark Schroeder, [‘The ubiquity of state-given reasons’](#)
- Justin Snedegar, [‘Reasons, oughts, and requirements’](#)

Week 3: Competition between reasons

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?’ (*WR*)
- Joshua Gert, [‘Normative strength and the balance of reasons’](#)

Supplementary readings:

- John F. Horty, [‘Reasons as defaults’](#)
- Patricia Greenspan, [‘Asymmetrical practical reasons’](#)
- Mark Schroeder, [‘What makes reasons sufficient?’](#)

Week 4: Conditional reasons and obligations

Conditional reasons/obligations are reasons/obligations you have if you perform particular acts, but not if you don’t. For example, suppose you can either (i) do nothing, (ii) sacrifice your arm to save 1 life, or (iii) sacrifice your arm to save 10 lives. We might think that you are not under an *unconditional* obligation to sacrifice your arm to save 1 life or to save 10 lives (i.e. it is permissible to do nothing), *but* we might think that, *conditional* on your sacrificing your arm (i.e. performing either (ii) or (iii)), you are obligated to save the 10 lives. We will explore puzzles about conditional reasons/obligations in the contexts of procreation and giving to charity.

Main readings:

- Ulla Wessels, [‘Beyond the call of duty: the structure of a moral region’](#)
- Johann Frick, ‘Conditional reasons and the procreation asymmetry’ (MMS)
- Theron Pummer, [‘Whether and where to give’](#)

Supplementary readings:

- Tina Rulli, ‘On conditional obligations’ (MMS)
- Jeff McMahan, ‘Doing good and doing the best’ (MMS)

Week 5: Additivity and holism

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’](#)

- Ralf Bader, 'Conditions, modifiers, and holism' (*WR*)

Supplementary readings:

- Campbell Brown, ['Two kinds of holism about values'](#)
- Tom Hurka, ['Two kinds of organic unity'](#)

Week 6: Independent Learning Week – No readings

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'](#), Chapter 2

Supplementary readings:

- Theron Pummer, 'Spectrum arguments and hypersensitivity' (MMS)
- Theron Pummer, ['Intuitions about large number cases'](#)
- Larry Temkin, ['Rethinking the Good'](#), Chapters 5, 6, and 9
- Stuart Rachels, ['Counterexamples to the transitivity of better than'](#)

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:

- Jacob Ross, ['Rethinking the person-affecting principle'](#)
- Larry Temkin, ['Rethinking Rethinking the Good'](#) (response to Ross)
- Timothy Campbell, 'Practical reasoning without transitivity' (MMS)

Supplementary readings:

- Larry Temkin, ['Rethinking the Good'](#), Chapters 11 and 12
- 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: 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 10: 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. Is rational choice possible in cases of value incomparability?

Main readings:

- Ruth Chang, [‘Value incomparability and incommensurability’](#)
- Ruth Chang, ‘Comparativism: the grounds of rational choice’ (*WR*)
- John Broome, [‘Is incommensurability vagueness?’](#)

Supplementary readings:

- Luke Elson, [‘Borderline cases and the collapsing principle’](#)
- Derek Parfit, ‘Towards Theory X’ (*MMS*)

Week 11: Reasons and morality

A common thought in moral philosophy is that it is easy to show that we have reason to look out for ourselves, but that substantial philosophical work must be done to show that we have reason to help others, or to act morally more generally. We will investigate some issues related to the question of whether we have any reason to act morally.

Main readings:

- Kate Manne, ‘Democratizing Humeanism’ (*WR*)
- Stephen Darwall, ‘Making the “hard” problem of moral normativity easier’ (*WR*)

Supplementary readings:

- Karl Schafer, ‘The modesty of the moral point of view’ (*WR*)
- Kate Manne, [‘Locating morality: moral imperatives as bodily imperatives’](#)
- Mark Schroeder, [‘*Slaves of the Passions*, Chapters 5 and 6](#)