

PHI 519/ CHV 519: Ethics and the Future
Spring semester 2014/15
Thursdays, 10am–12.50pm in Marx 201

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Course Description

What role does time play in our ethical theorizing? This seminar will survey recent work in normative ethics on various aspects of this question.

We will begin by looking at the relationship of moral agents to their own future actions. Consider the debate between actualists and possibilists about moral rightness. Do facts about what I *will* do affect what I *ought* to do? Suppose it is Professor Procrastinate's turn to serve as department chair. Procrastinate, however, can foresee that, if he accepts to become Chair, he will skimp on his duties, with highly detrimental consequences for his department. Is it therefore objectively right for Procrastinate to refuse to become Chair – despite the fact that, *were* he to accept the position and to decide to make an effort, Procrastinate would do a good job?

More generally: Under what conditions is it morally appropriate for an agent to treat her future actions as 'given' – to take a purely 'predictive' rather than a 'deliberative' stance towards her own future behavior? Could Professor Procrastinate *justify* his refusal to become Chair by appealing to his future laziness?

What of the future behavior of *other* agents? Consider the problem of intervening agency: I can foresee that if I perform some action A that would normally be permissible or even morally optimistic, another agent will subsequently perform some voluntary action B that seriously harms some innocent third party. If I do A, am I morally responsible for the harm that the intervening agent inflicts? What if my only way of preventing the intervening agent from doing B is by performing an action C that would ordinarily be morally impermissible? How do the consequences of *another* person's future actions affect my own reasons for action? More generally, to what extent am I required to take up the slack for other people's predictable wrongdoing?

Next, we will consider a set of questions about a person's moral power to *alter* the ways in which he is free to act in the future and the ways in which others may permissibly act towards him. I can seek to constrain my future actions, either *morally*, by making promises or entering into binding agreements with others, or *causally*, by closing off certain future options. What are the limits on this power? Are there certain promises that fail to bind my future self? Are there some ways of causally constraining my future actions that 'wrong' my future self? Relatedly, I have the moral power to make it permissible for others to treat me in ways that would otherwise have been morally wrong – by signing an advance directive, for instance, or by alienating certain future claims or rights of mine. Again, what are the limits on this moral power? Are some of my rights inalienable? Are there some ways of treating me that I can consent to *contemporaneously*, but not in advance or in retrospect?

The second half of this course will mainly focus on three issues:

(1) Our pre-theoretical attitudes towards our own wellbeing are often *temporally asymmetric*. All else equal, we would prefer our pleasures to lie in the future and our sufferings in the past, even at the price of experiencing *less* pleasure and *more* suffering over the course of our lifetimes. (Suppose you awake in a hospital bed, groggy and confused. You're unsure what exactly has happened. What you know is that today is *either* (i) the day *after* a *very* painful operation or (ii) the day *before* a *moderately* painful operation. Which would you hope is the case, (i) or (ii)? Many answer (i), although this way their life will have contained more pain overall, all else equal). Are such temporal asymmetries of self-concern rationally justified, or are they a rationally indefensible form of time-bias? Does our answer change when we shift from the first-personal to the third-personal case?

(2) In what way do a person's future attitudes, such as satisfaction or regret, bear on the normative evaluation of her present actions, and vice versa? Is the fact that in the future she will be *glad* that she did action A always a sound consideration in favor of choosing A? If not, why not? Similarly, is the claim that an agent acted morally wrongly by doing action B compatible with the claim that, in the future, it will be reasonable for her *not* to regret doing B?

(3) Can our own agency affect the balance of reasons between two courses of action? Are there 'voluntarist reasons', i.e. considerations that *become* reasons for actions only through an act of will, such that we sometimes *make* it true, through an act of will, that we have most reason to do one thing rather than another?

Finally, there will be two stand-alone sessions of the seminar, on the ethics of risk-imposition and on the moral status of future persons, in which I will present some of my own work in progress on these topics.

Guest Presentations

There will be four guest presentations:

- Victor Tadros (Warwick) will join us via Skype on Feb. 26 to discuss his draft "Permissibility in a World of Wrongdoing".
- Liz Harman (Princeton) will join us on April 16 to lead discussion of her paper "'I'll Be Glad I Did It' Reasoning and the Significance of Future Desires".
- Ruth Chang (Rutgers) will visit us on April 30 to lead discussion of her work on voluntarist reasons and transformative choice.
- R. J. Wallace (Berkeley) will visit the seminar on May 7 to discuss two chapters from his recent book *The View from Here: On Affirmation, Attachment, and the Limits of Regret*.

Course Requirements

Students wishing to take this course for credit (for a unit, in the case of philosophy graduate students; for a letter grade in the case of graduate students from other departments) are required to write a term paper of no more than 10,000 words and to give a brief presentation (up to 15 minutes) during one of our seminars.

Auditors are very welcome.

All readings will be posted on Blackboard.

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS AND READINGS

Feb. 5: Actualism vs Possibilism

1. Frank Jackson and Robert Pargetter, "Oughts, Options, and Actualism", *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 95, No. 2 (Apr., 1986), pp. 233-255.
2. Jennie Louise, "I won't do it! Self-Prediction, Moral Obligation and Moral Deliberation", *Philosophical Studies* 146 (2009), pp. 327-348.

Feb. 12: Taking Our Future Actions as Given; Deliberative vs Predictive Stances on Our Future Agency

1. Stuart Hampshire and H.L.A. Hart, "Intention, Decision, and Certainty", *Mind*, New Series 67:265 (1958), pp. 1-12.
2. G.A. Cohen, Chapter 1 "The Incentives Argument" (excerpts) in his *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 27-68.
3. Johann Frick: "What We Owe to Hypocrites: Contractualism and the Speaker-Relativity of Justification" (manuscript).

Feb. 19: Intervening Agency and Moral Responsibility

1. Joel Feinberg, "Causing Voluntary Actions" in his *Doing and Deserving: Essays in the Theory of Responsibility* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).
2. Michael Zimmerman, "Intervening Agents and Moral Responsibility", *The Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1985).
3. Saba Bazargan, "The Moral Relevance of Intervening Agency" (manuscript).

Feb. 26 Intervening Agency and Our Moral Obligations In Non-Ideal Theory

Guest Presenter: Victor Tadros (Warwick)

1. Victor Tadros, "Permissibility in a World of Wrongdoing" (manuscript).
2. David Miller, "Taking Up the Slack? Responsibility and Justice in Situations of Partial Compliance" in Knight and Stemplowska (eds.) *Responsibility and Distributive Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 230-245.
3. Larry Alexander, "Other People's Errors", *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* (2013) 16, pp. 1049-1059.

March 5: Binding One's Future Self

1. Derek Parfit, "Later Selves and Moral Principles" in Alan Montefiore (ed.) *Philosophy and Personal Relations* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 137-169.
2. Dan Brock, "Precommitment in Bioethics: Some Theoretical Issues", 81 *Texas Law Review* 1805-21 (2003).

March 12: What Moral Rights and Claims Can Be Alienated Ex Ante?

1. Frances Kamm, "Agreements" in *Morality, Mortality Volume 2: Rights, Duties, and Status* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 290-310.
2. Larry Alexander, "Voluntary Enslavement" in Christian Coons and Michael Weber (eds.) *Paternalism: Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 231-246.
3. Tom Dougherty, "Fickle Consent", *Philosophical Studies* 167:1 (2014), pp. 25-40.

SPRING BREAK

March 26: The Ethics of Risk

1. Johann Frick, "Contractualism and Social Risk: How to Count the Numbers Without Aggregating" (manuscript)
2. John Oberdiek, "Risk and the Distribution of Options" (manuscript)
3. Colleen Murphy, "Choosing Risks in Public Policy" (manuscript).

April 2: No class due to Pacific APA (make-up session on May 7)

April 9: Temporal Asymmetries of Concern

1. Derek Parfit, Chapter 8 "Different Attitudes to Time" in *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 149-186 (especially sections 64 and following).
2. Caspar Hare, "A Puzzle about Other-Directed Time-Bias", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 86:2 (2008), pp. 269-277.
3. Tom Dougherty, "On Whether to Prefer Pain to Pass", *Ethics* 121:3 (2011), pp. 521-537.

April 16: "I'll Be Glad I Did It" Reasoning

Guest Presenter: Liz Harman (Princeton)

1. Liz Harman, "'I'll Be Glad I Did It' Reasoning and the Significance of Future Desires", *Philosophical Perspectives* 23 Ethics (2009), pp. 177-199.
2. Other reading TBD.

April 23: The Moral Status of Future Persons

1. Johann Frick, "Conditional Reasons and the Procreation Asymmetry" (manuscript).
2. Johann Frick, "Context-Dependent Betterness and the Mere Addition Paradox" (manuscript).
3. Other reading TBD.

April 30: Voluntarist Reasons and Transformative Choice

Guest Presenter: Ruth Chang (Rutgers)

1. Ruth Chang, “Voluntarist Reasons and the Sources of Normativity” in Sobel and Wall (eds.) *Reasons for Action* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 243-71.
2. Ruth Chang, “Transformative Choices”, *Res Publica* special issue on Transformative Experiences, ed., Jonathan Jacobs, forthcoming.

May 7: Affirmation, Attachment, and the Limits of Regret

Guest Presenter: R.J. Wallace (Berkeley)

1. R. J. Wallace, Chapter 2 “Looking Backward (With Feeling)” and Chapter 3 “Affirming the Unacceptable” from his *The View from Here: On Affirmation, Attachment, and the Limits of Regret* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).