

Phil 93610: Difference-Making and Ethics

Tuesdays 12:30-3:15

Malloy 215

Zach Barnett and Sara Bernstein

Description

This course will focus on the role of causal difference-making (including interventionist and counterfactual accounts of causation) in relevant ethical debates, including the ethics of voting and climate change, interactions between individual and so-called collective obligations, and formulations of consequentialism. Readings will include Andreou, Barnett, Bernstein, Estlund, Guerrero, Lewis, Nefsky, Sartorio, Sayre-McCord, Schoenfield, Sinnott-Armstrong, Taurek, and others.

Some of the to-be-explored questions include: How can we address apparent mismatches that arise when we compare the moral status of certain collective acts with the moral status of individual acts that compose them? To what extent is individual contribution a causal notion, and does it “scale up” to collectives? Is one morally obligated to act even when it won’t make a causal difference? How do we make sense of metaphysically vague thresholds for moral consequences?

Learning Goals

- Students will learn about the role of causation, causal concepts, and especially difference-making concepts in ethical theories and debates.
- Students will be able to critically evaluate how the role of difference-making affects first-order ethical debates.
- Students will gain an independent perspective on important recent work at the intersection of ethics and metaphysics, including on questions about the ethics of collective action problems, questions about the nature of causation, and questions about the ethics of vagueness.
- Students will benefit from the different but overlapping areas of expertise of the instructors, and the instructors will benefit from articulating a dialogue between metaphysics and ethics.

Evaluating Student Performance

Class participation in every class session is expected. Students will be expected to complete one well-crafted term paper due at the end of the semester, as well as a presentation based on the paper. The instructors will provide feedback on both pieces of work, with the aim of helping students eventually draft potentially publishable research pertaining to the material from the course. Instructors will help students to revise their papers with this goal in mind.

Schedule

January 14: Introduction

Overview of Course
Discussion of Slice and Patch

January 21: Degrees of Causation

Sara Bernstein, "Causal Proportions and Moral Responsibility"
Carolina Sartorio, "More of a Cause?"
Huzeyfe Demirtas, "Causation comes in Degrees"

January 28: *Virtual Visit by Carolina Sartorio*

Carolina Sartorio, "Responsibility, Causation, and the Cart-Horse Metaphor"

February 4: Small Differences (I)

Shelly Kagan: "Do I Make a Difference?"
Julia Nefsky: "Consequentialism and the Problem of Collective Harm"

February 11: Small Differences (II)

Zach Barnett: "No Free Lunch: The Significance of Tiny Contributions"
Brian Hedden: "Consequentialism and Collective Action"
optional: Erik Carlson et al: "The Significance of Tiny Contributions: Barnett and Beyond"

February 18: Numbers (I)

John Taurek, "Should the Numbers Count?"
Tyler Doggett, "Saving the Few"

February 25: Numbers (II)

Daniel Muñoz, "Each Counts for One"
Leora Urim Sung, "Never Just Save the Few"
optional: Zach Barnett, "Save the Five: Meeting Taurek's Challenge"

March 4: The Ethics and Rationality of Voting (I)

Luke Maring, "Debate: Why Does the Excellent Citizen Vote?"
Alex Guerrero, "The Paradox of Voting and the Ethics of Political Representation"
optional: Zach Barnett, "Why you Should Vote to Change the Outcome"
optional: Devin Lane, "Expert Disagreement and the Duty to Vote"

March 18: Probability and Punishment

David Lewis, "The Punishment that Leaves Something to Chance"
Caspar Hare, "Consequentialism and Indeterminacy"

March 25: *Virtual visit by Julia Nefsky*

Reading TBA
optional: Julia Nefsky, "Collective harm and the inefficacy problem"

April 1: (talks by Sara and Zach)

April 8: Deviant Causation

Sara Bernstein, "Moral Luck and Deviant Causation"
Sara Bernstein, "Deviant Causation and the Law"
Martin Montminy, "It was not supposed to happen like that: blameworthiness, causal deviance and luck"

April 15 (Sara not in town): Vagueness and Ethics

Mattias Gunnemyr, "Making a vague difference: Kagan, Nefsky and the Sorites Paradox"
Miriam Schoenfield, "Moral Vagueness is Ontic Vagueness"

April 22: (student presentations 1)

April 29: (student presentations 2)

Office Hours

Sara Bernstein, Malloy 202, by appointment (sbernste@nd.edu)
Zach Barnett: Malloy 402, Wednesday 3-5 and by appointment. (zach.barnett@nd.edu)

COVID/illness policy

Please do not come to class if you are sick or if you've had a probable COVID exposure. Send us an email and we will do our best to catch you up on course material.

Philosophical "bedside manner"

It is best to be generous and charitable in philosophical and intellectual interactions. Remember that we, as philosophers, are all on the same side— the side of discovering the best theories and truths.