

Metaphysics of Ethics

Sara Bernstein
M 12:30-3:15 Geddes B036

Metaphysical concepts and tools such as causation, properties, relations, and possible worlds are at the heart of many ethical problems. For example: moral culpability depends in part on causation. An agent's responsibility for an outcome is partially determined by causal facts. The distinction between killing and letting die rests on the distinction between action and omission. The non-identity problem, the problem of moral obligation to non-existent persons, hangs on metaphysical issues about diachronic identity and non-existence. Theories of collective responsibility depend on particular views about composition, constitution, and causation. And the ethics of human persons often depends on particular views of personal identity. This course will explore and address these and similar topics in the metaphysics of ethics, with an eye to using metaphysical tools to sharpen ethical questions and solve ethical problems.

This course can count for either the graduate metaphysics requirement or the graduate ethics requirement, depending on the work done in the course.

All readings will be on Sakai.

Assessment:

- 30% class participation
- 10% in-class presentation on a reading or a topic related to the reading
- 60% final paper

Schedule:

January 23: Introduction: what is the metaphysics of ethics?

January 30: Metaphysics of Causation and Moral Responsibility

(1) Sara Bernstein, "Causal Proportions and Moral Responsibility", *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility*, ed. David Shoemaker, Oxford: Oxford University Press. (2017)

(2) Carolina Sartorio, "Causation and Ethics", In Helen Beebe, Christopher Hitchcock & Peter Menzies (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of Causation* Oxford University Press (2009)

February 6: Killing versus Letting Die

(1) Alastair Norcross, "Killing and Letting Die", In R. G. Frey and Christopher Heath Wellman (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Applied Ethics*: 451-463. (2003)

(2) Carolina Sartorio, "Moral Inertia", *Philosophical Studies* 14:1, pp 117–133 (2008).

February 13: Omissions and Moral Responsibility

(1) Sara Bernstein, "Omissions as Possibilities", *Philosophical Studies* 167 1-23 (2014).

(2) Jonathan Schaffer, "Causation by Disconnection", *Philosophy of Science* 67 (2): 285-300 (2000).

February 20: The Metaphysics of Moral Obligation

(1) Caspar Hare, "Obligations to Merely Statistical People", *Journal of Philosophy* 109 (5-6): 378-390 (2012).

(2) John Taurek, "Should the Numbers Count?", *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6 (4):293-316.

February 27: Attempts

(1) Gideon Yaffe, *Attempts* (excerpt)

(2) David Lewis, "The Punishment that Leaves Something to Chance" *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 18 (1):53-67 (1989).

Optional: David Brink, "The Path to Completion" in *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility*, ed. David Shoemaker, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2017).

March 6: Groups

(1) Katherine Ritchie, "What are Groups?" *Philosophical Studies* 166 (2):257-272 (2013).

(2) Rebecca Mason, "The Metaphysics of Social Kinds" *Philosophy Compass* 11(12):841-850. (2016)

Optional: Gabriel Uzquiano, "The Supreme Court and the Supreme Court Justices: a Metaphysical Puzzle" *Noûs* 38 (1):135–153 (2004).

March 20: Collective Responsibility

- (1) Sarah Rachel Chant, "Responsibility Unincorporated" (draft)
- (2) Virginia Held, "Can a Random Collection of Individuals be Morally Responsible?" *Journal of Philosophy* 67 (14):471-481 (1970).

March 27: Metaphysical Indeterminacy in Ethics

- (1) Sara Bernstein, "Causal and Moral Indeterminacy" *Ratio* 29:4 434-447 (2016).
- (2) Tom Dougherty, "Vague Value" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 89/2: 352-372 (2014).
- Optional: Miriam Schoenfield, "Moral Vagueness is Ontic Vagueness" *Ethics* 126(2): 257-282 (2015).

April 3: Time/ Space Analogies and Ethics

- (1) Andre Gallois, "Asymmetry in Attitudes and the Nature of Time" *Philosophical Studies* 76 (1):51-69 (1994).
- (2) Caspar Hare, "A Puzzle about Other-Directed Time Bias" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 86 (2):269-277 (2008).

April 10: Procreation and The Non-Identity Problem

- (1) Elizabeth Harman, "The Potentiality Problem" *Philosophical Studies* 114 (1-2):173-198 (2003).
- (2) Derek Parfit, "The Non-Identity Problem" (excerpt from *Reasons and Persons*)
- Optional: Molly Gardner, "Beneficence and Procreation" *Philosophical Studies* 173 (2):321-336 (2016).

April 24: Metaphysics and Ethics Mad Science

- (1) Sara Bernstein, "Ethical Puzzles of Time Travel" (draft)
- (2) Adam Elga, "Defeating Dr. Evil with Self-locating Belief" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 69 (2):383-396 (2004).

May 1: Paper Presentations

A few notes concerning...

Class Participation

Philosophical skill is best acquired by *doing philosophy* rather than passively learning about it. Active participation in class, which includes asking questions, coming up with cool and/ or silly examples, asking for clarification on confusing concepts, and/ or presenting an informed opinion about the reading, is central to learning to do philosophy. Talking twice per class will be enough to do well in class participation.

Philosophical “Bedside Manner”

Academic philosophy has a reputation as a blood sport. It need not be so. We’re all in the Truth Trenches together. Philosophical interaction can be friendly and collaborative while still being constructive and rigorous. Please contribute to class in ways that aim at discovering the truth rather than establishing intellectual dominance.

Syllabus Changes

It is possible that topics will be added, removed, or changed on the syllabus. If this happens, it will be announced in class and over email.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is representing another person’s work as one’s own. Outside works must be clearly cited or placed in quotes. Any cheating will be handled according to the university’s policy on academic dishonesty. Please see the Honor Code for more information.

Ways to Reach Sara, or her Indistinguishable Robot Clone

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