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Areas of Specialization

Ethical Theory, Applied Ethics, Bioethics

Areas of Competence

Political Philosophy, Logic (through the incompleteness results),
Philosophy of Mathematics, Metaphysics, Philosophy of Logic, Set Theory

Current Position

Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Clinical Bioethics, National Institutes of Health

Education

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (09/1997 - 06/2002)

- Ph.D. in Philosophy

Brandeis University (08/2002-05/2003)

- M.A. in Comparative History

Brandeis University (01/1995 - 05/1997)

- B.A. (Highest Honors) in Philosophy
- B.A. (High Honors) in Mathematics

Honors, Awards and Fellowships

- Full Graduate Fellowship (MIT), 1997 – 2002
- Summa Cum Laude, Brandeis University, 1997
- Phi Beta Kappa Society, 1997
- Esther Pine Memorial Prize for 1996-1997, Brandeis University

Papers

- “*Beyond Accountability for Reasonableness*” (submitted for publication)
- “*Intransitive Ethics*” (submitted for publication)
- “Which Benefits Qualify as ‘Direct’?”, coauthors Emily Robbins and David Wendler (submitted for publication)
- “*Fairness and the Problem of Numbers*”
- “*Aggregation and the Relation of Moral Indifference*”

Papers in Progress

- “Intransitivity and Priority Setting”, coauthor Marion Danis
- “The Return of the Trolley”
- “The Problem of Numbers”

Presentations and Talks

- “Which Benefits Qualify as Direct?” – National Institutes of Health Bioethics Interest Group, scheduled for December, 2006
- “Working Around Intransitivity” – 6th International Conference on Priorities in Health Care, Toronto, September 2006
- “*Do Numbers Count in Ethics?*” – Brown Bag Tea Lecture Series, Brandeis University, April 2002
- “*The Return of the Trolley*” – MATTI reading group, MIT, October 2000

Courses Taught

What is the Best Way to Live? at MIT - Spring 2003

Ethics at MIT - Spring 2003

Logic at Brandeis University - Spring 2002

Introduction to Symbolic Logic at Brandeis University - Fall 2001

Teaching Assistantships

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

- T.A. for *Logic I*, Michael Glanzberg - Fall 2001
- T.A. for *Problems in Philosophy*, Sally Haslanger - Fall 2000
- T.A. for *Modern Philosophers from Descartes to Kant*, Ned Hall - Spring 2000
- T.A. for *What is the Best Way to Live?*, Ralph Wedgwood - Fall 1999
- T.A. for *Problems in Philosophy*, Michael Glanzberg - Spring 1999
- T.A. for *Problems in Philosophy*, Judith Thomson - Fall 1998

Harvard University

- T.F. for *Logic and the Foundations of Mathematics*, Peter Koellner – Spring 2005
- T.F. for *The Responsibilities of Public Action* (Kennedy School of Government), Michael Blake - Fall 2004
- T.F. for *Nonconsequentialism*, Frances Kamm – Spring 2004
- T.F. for *Foundations of Spacetime*, Peter Koellner - Fall 2003
- T.F. for *Bioethics*, Frances Kamm – Spring 2002
- Head T.F. for *Deductive Logic*, Warren Goldfarb - Fall 2001
- T.F. for *The Responsibilities of Public Action* (Kennedy School of Government), Archon Fung - Fall 2001

Brandeis University

- T.A. for *Introduction To Symbolic Logic*, Jerry Samet - Fall 2004
- T.A. for *Intro to Ethics*, Marion Smiley - Fall 2002
- T.A. for *Philosophy of Mind*, Jerry Samet - Spring 1998
- T.A. and Tutor for *Introduction To Symbolic Logic*, Jerry Samet - Spring 1997
- Tutor for *Introduction To Symbolic Logic*, Jerry Samet - Fall 1996

Relevant Graduate Seminars Attended (MIT)

- *Proseminar I* (Analytic Philosophy: Frege to Wittgenstein): Ned Hall
- *Proseminar II* (Analytic Philosophy: Wittgenstein to Kripke): Judith Thomson,
Robert Stalnaker
- *Classical Set Theory*: Vann McGee
- *Topics in Philosophy of Language* (Vagueness) : Vann McGee
(Audited)
- *Problems in Metaphysics* (Constitution and Identity): Judith Thomson
- *Topics in Theory of Knowledge* (Constructing Reality, Emotions): Catherine
Elgin
- *Mathematical Logic* (Incompleteness results, etc.; at Math Dept.): Sy Friedman
- *Modal Logic*: Vann McGee
- *Topics in the History of Philosophy* (Kant): Carol Voeller
- *Topics in Moral Philosophy* (Metaethics, Killing/Letting Die,
the Doctrine of Double Effect, etc.): Judith Thomson
- *Topics in Logic* (Implicit Definitions, Truth): Vann McGee
- *Problems in Metaphysics* ("Things, Properties, and All That" - Identity, Intrinsicness, Epistemology of Essence, etc.): Stephen Yablo
(Audited)
- *Topics in Moral Philosophy* (Metaethics): Ralph Wedgwood
(Audited)
- *Topics in the History of Philosophy* (Aristotle): Sally Haslanger
- *Problems in Metaphysics* (Events, Causation): Ned Hall, Judith Thomson
(Audited)
- *Philosophy of Mathematics*
(Realism, Fictionalism, Figuralism): Stephen Yablo
(Audited)
- *Topics in Philosophical Logic* (Logicism, Skepticism, Second-
Order Logic, Plural Quantification): Vann McGee
(Audited)

Dissertation Title

Minimizing Harm: Three Problems in Moral Theory

Selected Paper Abstracts

Beyond Accountability for Reasonableness: This paper is a critique of Norman Daniels' and James Sabin's Accountability for Reasonableness framework for making priority setting decisions in health care in the face of widespread disagreement about values. Accountability for Reasonableness has been rapidly gaining worldwide acceptance, arguably to the point of becoming the dominant paradigm in the field of health policy. The framework attempts to set ground rules for a fair procedure that ensures that whatever decisions result will be fair, reasonable, and legitimate to the extent that even those who would be adversely affected will have reason to abide by them. I argue that the framework's four conditions are inadequate to this task. While we certainly require a fair and legitimate procedure for making priority setting decisions in health care despite a lack of consensus on relevant ethical and political issues, we must significantly revise the four conditions, and we cannot avoid facing our substantive disagreements head on if we hope to arrive at decisions that would (and should) be acceptable to everyone. I offer two suggestions. First, there is need for greater public involvement in all stages of deliberation. Second, we should give up on the idea that we can simplify the task of democratic deliberation by disallowing particular kinds or reasons and types of reasoning. Reasons of all kinds should be on the table, but then should be judged on their merits, such as consistency, plausibility and explanatory power, without any regard for their alleged sources of authority.

Intransitive Ethics: “Intransitive Ethics” deals with the question of whether or not the relation of moral preference is transitive. I argue, following the work of Larry Temkin and Stuart Rachels, that any ethical theory complex enough to be even minimally plausible, will make it possible to generate intransitive sets of preferences. Even act utilitarianism cannot avoid this predicament unless we accept the crudest and least plausible version – hedonistic total act utilitarianism (including Parfit’s Repugnant Conclusion). Thus the assumption that an ethical theory must meet the transitivity criterion in order to be considered rational must be reevaluated. This is an extremely important problem in ethical theory, which amounts to an equivalent of a foundational crisis in ethics. However, despite the work of moral philosophers like Temkin and Rachels, the problem has not so far been taken seriously by the philosophical community. As this paper contends, this is primarily the case for two reasons: (1) The belief that the problem might have limited scope, applying only to some non-consequentialist theories; and (2) The claim that the arguments of Temkin and Rachels are “merely” Sorites arguments. “Intransitive Ethics” responds to both of these objections in order to highlight just how serious and pervasive the problem is, so that vitally needed attention is finally directed towards addressing it. In the process, I also point out some interesting connections between the problem of intransitivity and the debate surrounding skepticism about the moral significance of numbers, as exemplified by John Taurek’s “Should the Numbers Count?”

Which Benefits Qualify as Direct?: The concept of ‘direct’ benefit is of great importance in the federal regulations guiding research with human subjects, especially when dealing with pediatric research. However, no clear explanation is available of either the distinction between direct and indirect benefits itself, or of the moral significance of this distinction. As a result, neither researchers nor Internal Review Boards (IRBs) can have a clear understanding of what the regulations require, let alone of what the justifications for those requirements may be. In practical terms, without such an understanding we should worry, on one hand, about the possibility of disallowing beneficial and ethical research based on misguided or misanalyzed moral concerns; and, on the other hand, about the possibility of affording insufficient protections from risky research to children and cognitively impaired individuals. This paper offers an analysis of the direct/indirect benefit distinction that explains what the distinction is, how to draw it, why it is morally significant, and what it implies for some of the cases with regard to which there is currently no consensus (and much confusion and dissatisfaction) among bioethicists and IRBs. Our basic approach is to consider why we need the direct/indirect benefit distinction in the first place, and why it would be of especial significance when dealing with research subjects who are incapable of consent. The key, we argue, is that when potential research subjects cannot competently make relevant decisions about personal and societal trade-offs, the benefits that are of special significance and that have the most uncontroversial justificatory force are precisely the kinds of benefits that the research will hopefully make available to members of the general public - i.e., the very same kinds of benefits that presumably motivate and justify the research in the first place. If research subjects are not asked to undertake risks for sake of benefits to others in which they will not share, this substantially reduces the ethical difficulties resulting from a lack of valid informed consent. From this starting point we can proceed to a generalized analysis of the circumstances under which some benefits of research can legitimately offset risks. One crucial consequence is that, under certain circumstances, risks of necessary procedures that in and of themselves offer no benefit to research subjects can be justifiably offset by the direct benefits of an investigational procedure that the research is aimed at evaluating.

Intransitivity and Priority Setting: It is a basic and intuitive assumption of ethical theory that the relation of moral preferability must be transitive – if A is overall morally preferable to B; and B is overall morally preferable to C; then, if our views are coherent, it better be the case that A is overall morally preferable to C. However, recent work by Temkin and Rachels has undermined that assumption by showing that common-sense ethical distributive principles that we are unlikely to give up generate intransitive sets of moral preferences. The consequences of this for resource allocation are profound: how can we come up with a just way of rationing limited resources if whatever course of action we adopt, there will be other alternatives that are morally preferable to it? However, regardless of the theoretical challenges, practical resource allocation decisions must be made every day! We explore an approach to dealing with some of the pragmatic aspects of the problem, even though the theoretical difficulties remain. Our approach involves considering whether the ways in which counterexamples to transitivity have (of necessity) been oversimplified actually contribute to the intractability of the problem by taking the possibilities of cost sharing, benefit splitting, and compensation, which are usually available in real-life tradeoff situations, off the table. Since our proposal does not rely on any assumptions or judgments about interpersonal aggregation, it has a chance of allowing us to work around the most troubling kind of intransitivity.

The Problem of Numbers: In this paper I discuss whether or not numbers matter in morality in the way that most people think they do, i.e. in the way which is best exemplified by the claim that all other things being equal, if two non-overlapping groups of people cannot both be saved from a deadly threat, we should save the numerically larger group. My goal is to defend John Taurek's criticism of the standard view of the role of numbers in morality, and to establish Taurek's position, despite its shortcomings, as a viable alternative to the standard view. After pointing out the underappreciated fact that in "Should the Numbers Count?" Taurek has two independent arguments for his conclusion, I proceed to defend both arguments from some of the more prominent objections that have been raised against them. I also discuss the role that fairness plays in the debate. Ultimately, in light of considerations derived from several of the objections that I address, it becomes clear that Taurek's first argument has to be rejected. In addition, several modifications have to be made in Taurek's overall position in order to make it consistent and (at least minimally) plausible. However, the second argument, which focuses on the claim that interpersonal aggregates of losses or suffering carry little, if any, moral significance, and which, I argue, is a much more powerful and illuminating argument to begin with, still remains to challenge the standard view. But Taurek's position is not without serious difficulties either - in the last section I point out and try to address several problems that should be a concern to anyone who is sympathetic to Taurek's views, including the problem of very large numbers.

The Return of the Trolley: This paper is about the Trolley Problem. Very roughly and simplistically stated, the problem is to explain why it is apparently morally permissible to divert a runaway trolley to a track where it will kill one innocent person rather than five, but not morally permissible to kill an innocent healthy person in order to use his organs in saving the lives of five others. I examine in detail several prominent purported solutions to the problem, and find them all severely deficient. In light of the systematic failure of efforts to solve the Trolley Problem, I suggest that perhaps no solution has been found because there is no solution to find - the actions in question in the two cases fall on the same side of the moral permissibility line. I proceed to give a positive argument for the claim that diverting the trolley is not morally permissible, and try to give an explanation of how the intuitions of the majority could have been so deeply mistaken. Since my proposed "solution" relies heavily on the alleged moral role of the making/allowing distinction, I conclude with a discussion of that distinction, as well as a defense of its moral significance.

References

Judith Thomson, MIT
Frances Kamm, Harvard University
Archon Fung, Harvard University
Ezekiel Emanuel, National Institutes of Health
Alan Wertheimer, National Institutes of Health
David Wendler, National Institutes of Health

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