

The Limits of Duty Workshop

June 14th 2013

University of Cambridge

Programme

All activities will take place in the Sidgwick Hall at [Newnham College](#)

9:00 – 9:15 **Registration**

9:15 – 10:05 **Claire Benn** (University of Cambridge)

Supererogatory Spandrels

The ‘good-ought tie-up’, a thesis that denies that there can be any actions that are both good and optional, provides a challenge to the possibility of supererogatory actions, which are by definition both good and optional. Those who wish to establish the possibility of supererogatory actions must reject the good-ought tie-up by arguing for why our duty must be limited. The argument for limiting our duty is often motivated by an appeal to the value of supererogatory actions. I argue that such an appeal is unlikely to convince those sceptical about supererogation and gives the false impression that supererogation is a concept that has few implications for other aspects of our ethical theory. Instead, I argue that many cases of supererogatory action should be thought of as ‘spandrels’: as by-products of relatively uncontroversial assumptions in other areas of moral thought. Spaces for optional actions, and thus the limits placed on our duty, are created without the need to appeal to the value of supererogatory actions. By identifying these cases of supererogatory spandrels, I demonstrate that ethicists need not be committed supererogationists in order to be committed to the possibility of supererogatory actions.

10:15 – 11:05 **Brian McElwee** (University of St. Andrews)

Demandingness objections in ethics

Moral theories are frequently rejected on the basis that they are too demanding. I aim to establish what structure convincing demandingness objections must have. Firstly, demandingness objections apply to a theory not primarily in virtue of its ranking of actions, but in virtue of its account of moral requirement. This suggests that theories with consequentialist rankings need not be any more vulnerable to demandingness objections than other plausible moral theories. Secondly, I consider the role that an appeal to cost should have in demandingness objections. I argue that the claim must be understood as an appeal to the costs that the theory calls on moral agents (as opposed to ‘patients’, those affected by the behaviour which the moral theory assesses) to bear. I argue that a plausible account of moral demands must take account of (a) the spontaneous verdicts of our reactive attitudes to agents and (b) typical levels of altruistic motivation.

11:15 – 11:30 **Break** – tea and coffee

11:30 – 12:20 **Robbie Arrell** (Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics,
University of Melbourne)

*Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow? Specifying the Limits of the Robustness of
Associative Duties across Change*

Special relationships generate associative duties that exhibit robustness across change. It seems insufficient for friendship, for example, if I am only disposed to fulfil associative duties towards you as things stand here and now. However, robustness is not required across all variations. Were you to become monstrously cruel towards me, we might expect that my associative duties towards you would not be robust across that kind of change. The question then is this: is there any principled way of distinguishing those variations that require robustness of the disposition to fulfil associative duties from those that don't?

In this paper I suggest a way of answering this question that draws on the distinction between how things have value, and how we value things – a distinction that is central to the broader account of the sources and generation of associative duties that I propose.

12:30 – 13:30 **Lunch**

13:30 – 14:20 **Alice Pinheiro Walla** (Trinity College, Dublin)

Kant's moral theory and demandingness

This paper addresses problems arising from Kant's distinction between perfect and imperfect duties. Firstly, I discuss the intuition that imperfect duties are able to "trump" perfect ones under certain circumstances. If this intuition is correct, Kant's distinction between perfect and imperfect duties seems irrelevant, since it is not the logical structure of the duty that tells us what is to be done under the circumstances. Further, if this intuition is correct, there is also the worry that beneficence may be far more demanding than Kant himself realized. I also mention the "tragic side" of Kant's moral theory, which does not exclude the possibility of agents having to sacrifice their happiness for the sake of morality. I offer possible ways to address these problems compatible with Kant's theory.

14:30 – 14:45 **Break** – tea and coffee

14:45 – 16:30 **Keynote: David Owens** (University of Reading)

The nature of duty and its limits

On one influential theory of promising, promising involves the transfer of a right to determine whether you do something. So when I successfully promise you that I'll be at the bus stop at a certain time, I transfer to you the right to determine whether I'll show up. Advocates of the 'transfer theory' include both the dead (like Grotius, Hobbes and Locke) and the living (like Gary Watson and Seana Shiffrin). One apparent implication of this theory is that I can successfully promise to do only what I have a right to do, so if I have no right to be at the bus stop (e.g. because I've promised to be elsewhere) then I can't successfully promise to show up. So my promissory duties are limited by my pre-promissory rights. This paper considers the merits of the transfer theory and the plausibility of this implication.