

Risky Ethics

Week 3: Prioritarianism

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Overview.

Mike Otsuka and Alex Voorhoeve present a criticism of the Priority View, claiming that it fails to account for the normative “shift” between intrapersonal and interpersonal trade-offs, due to it violating the separateness of persons (2009). Lara Buchak presents relative Prioritarianism and demonstrates that it is the natural conclusion of adopting risk-weighted expected utility calculations under the veil of ignorance (2017). Crucially, Buchak claims that relative Prioritarianism can account for the “shift” – Stephanie Van Fossen rejects this claim (2024).

Otsuka and Voorhoeve’s Argument

1. What is Parfit’s ‘Priority View’? How does it compare to other forms of Prioritarianism? How is it distinct from egalitarian views?
2. In the one-person case, Otsuka and Voorhoeve claim that it is reasonable to choose the option which most improves the expected utility of the patient. Why is this? Is this plausible?
3. Why can’t the Priority View account for normative shift between the one-person and group case?
4. What is Otsuka and Voorhoeve’s argument to the effect that, even if we reject the claim that it is morally appropriate to choose the option which most improves the expected utility of patient in the one-person case, the Priority View still cannot account for a morally significant shift?
5. What is the separateness of persons? Why should we care about it? What range of upshots might it have for ethical theorising?
6. What problems do accounts which rely on the intrinsic badness of inequality face?
7. How do Otsuka and Voorhoeve account for the moral importance of the shift between one-person and many-person cases without relying on the intrinsic badness of inequality? How does it avoid the levelling-down objection?

8. What is the autonomy objection to Otsuka and Voorhoeve's argument? How do they respond?

Buchak's response

9. How does decision theory compare to social choice theory? What parts of them are analogous?
10. What are rank dependent decision rules? What is risk-weighted expected utility? What are the three psychological components of preference formation and decision-making? What are different risk attitudes and their associated risk functions?
11. How do utilitarianism, maximin equity and rank-weighted utilitarianism compare?
12. What are social gambles, and what is their connection to the Rawls, Harsanyi and the original position? What is the disagreement between Harsanyi and Rawls?
13. Buchak suggests that when making decisions on behalf of others, we should adopt a risk-averse attitude. What is her reason for thinking this? How risk avoidant should we be? What do we do if we know the patient's risk attitudes? What is the Risk Principle?
14. If we accept the Risk Principle, how do we arrive at relative Prioritarianism?
15. Why does Buchak believe that applying the Risk Principle in the original position, we arrive at genuine moral distributive principles?
16. How does Buchak account for "the shift" in her relative Prioritarianism?

Van Fossen's Criticism

17. Why does Van Fossen believe the shift in Buchak's account is not equivalent to Otsuka and Voorhoeve's shift?
18. How does relative Prioritarianism imply a "reverse shift"?