

Social Choice Theory: Social Welfare and Individual Preferences

Graduate Seminar, Fall 2012

Wednesday, 4 - 6 PM

234 Moses Hall

Professor Lara Buchak

Office Hours: Tues 11-1, 247 Moses Hall

Course Description

This seminar explores connection between social welfare and individual preferences. What bearing does preference satisfaction have on well-being? Which normative principles are important to respect in social distributions, and how are these principles represented in formal theories about determining social welfare? In particular, we will consider how equality matters to the value of a social distribution; and whether a social distribution should respect Pareto optimality, the idea that if everyone prefers x to y then x is socially preferred to y . We will also consider the question of how interpersonal considerations in picking a social distribution relate to individual considerations in picking a gamble, and the question of what individual preferences in decision-making under risk reveal about social preferences. Finally, we will consider the distribution of value over time.

This course is intended for graduate students in philosophy, but advanced undergraduates may enroll with permission. No background in decision, game, or social choice theory is required, but a general facility with technical material is assumed.

Assignments

Presentation: Each student must prepare a short presentation on the readings for one week. You should consider yourself an expert on that week's reading, and be prepared to respond to other students' questions and help clarify the discussion.

Paper: Each student will write a paper of length and quality appropriate for a graduate student in philosophy. Please consult with me about your topic before you begin writing. Papers are due on Friday, Dec 7th.

Graduate students please note: the area requirement that this course fulfills depends on the content of your paper. The most natural fit is Area 3, but a suitable topic might fit into Area 2.

Tentative Schedule

Week 1. Introduction and History (8/29)

Optional: Daniel M. Hausman & Michael S. McPherson, "Rationality," chapter 4 of *Economic Analysis, Moral Philosophy, and Public Policy* (2nd ed., Cambridge UP, 2006).

Week 2. Representation Theorems, Utility and Commensurability (9/5)

James Dreier, "Decision Theory and Morality." (excerpt)

John Broome, "Utility." In *Ethics out of Economics*.

John Broome, "Incommensurable Values." In *Ethics out of Economics*.

Optional: Michael Resnik, "Decisions Under Risk: Utility." Chapter 4 of *Choices* (U Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 81-120.

Week 3 & 4. Interpersonal Comparability (9/12 & 9/19)

Allan Gibbard, "Interpersonal comparisons: preference, good, and the intrinsic reward of a life." In *Foundations of Social Choice Theory*, eds. Jon Elster and Aanund Hylland (Cambridge UP, 1986), pp. 165-194.

Donald Davidson, "Judging Interpersonal Interests." In *Foundations of Social Choice Theory*, eds. Jon Elster and Aanund Hylland (Cambridge UP, 1986), pp. 195-213.

Optional: Daniel M. Hausman, "The Impossibility of Interpersonal Utility Comparisons." *Mind* 104 (1995), pp. 473-490.

Week 5. Arrow and Harsanyi (9/26)

Michael Resnik, "Social Choices." Chapter 6 of *Choices*, pp. 177-215 (skip the proofs).

Steedman, Ian and Krause, Ulrich, "Goethe's *Faust* and Arrow's Possibility Theorem." In The Multiple Self, ed. Jon Elster. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Optional Background (for a less technical explanation): Daniel M. Hausman & Michael S. McPherson, "Social Choice Theory," of *Economic Analysis, Moral Philosophy, and Public Policy* (2nd ed., Cambridge UP, 2006), pp. 217-225.

Optional Background (for a more technical explanation): Kenneth Arrow, "A Difficulty in the Concept of Social Welfare."

Optional Background (for a more technical explanation): "Cardinal welfare, individualistic ethics, and interpersonal comparisons of utility." *Journal of Political Economy* 63 (1955): 309-321.

Week 6. Pareto Optimality (10/3)

Amartya Sen, "The impossibility of a Paretian liberal." *Journal of Political Economy* 78 (1970), 152-7.

Amartya Sen, "Liberty and Social Choice." (1983). *Journal of Philosophy* 80:1 (1983), 5-28.

Brian Barry, "Lady Chatterley's Lover and Doctor Fischer's Bomb Party: liberalism, Pareto optimality, and the problem of objectionable preferences." In *Foundations of Social Choice Theory*, eds. Jon Elster and Aanund Hylland (Cambridge UP, 1986), pp. 11-44.

Optional: Aanund Hylland, "The purpose and significance of social choice theory: some general remarks and an application to the 'Lady Chatterley problem.'" In *Foundations of Social Choice Theory*, eds. Jon Elster and Aanund Hylland (Cambridge UP, 1986), pp. 45-74.

Week 7. The Value of Equality (10/10)

Nagel, "Equality." In *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge UP, 1991), pp. 106-127.

Larry S. Temkin, "Equality, Priority, and the Levelling Down Objection." In The Ideal of Equality, eds. Matthew Clayton and Andrew Williams. MacMillan Press LTD, 2000.

Optional Background: Parfit, "Equality and Priority." *Ratio* X3 (1997), pp. 202-221.

10/17 – NO CLASS

Week 8. Formally Representing Risk-Aversion and Inequality-Aversion (10/24)

John Rawls, "Some Reasons for the Maximin Criterion." *American Economic Review* 64:2 (1974), 141-146.

Iwao Hirose, "Reconsidering the Value of Equality." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* (2009).

Lara Buchak, *Risk and Rationality*. Selections.

Optional: John C. Harsanyi, "Can the Maximin Principle Serve as a Basis for Morality?" *American Political Science Review* 69:2 (1975), 594-606.

Week 9. The Sure-Thing Principle in Decision Theory (10/31)

John Broome, "Expected Utility and Rationality." Chapter 5 of *Weighing Goods* (Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp. 90-120.

Lara Buchak, "Consistency and Consequentialism." Chapter 5 of *Risk and Rationality* (Oxford UP, forthcoming).

Optional: Leonard J. Savage, "Allais's Paradox."

Optional: Edward McClennen, "Sure-Thing Doubts?"

Week 10. The Pareto and Sure-Thing Principle in Social Choice Theory (11/7)

John Broome, "The Coherence of Good." Chapter 6 of *Weighing Goods* (Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp. 121-150.

John Broome, "Coherence Against the Pareto Principle." Chapter 7 of *Weighing Goods* (Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp. 151-164.

Week 11. Are Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Considerations Analogous? (11/14)

John Broome, "The Interpersonal Addition Theorem." Chapter 10 of *Weighing Goods* (Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp. 202-223 (203-209 optional).

Otsuka & Voorhoeve, "Why it matters that some are worse off than others: An Argument Against the Priority View." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 37:2 (2009), pp. 171-199.

Week 12. The Value of Equality, Formally (11/21)

John Broome, "The Principle of Personal Good." Chapter 8 of *Weighing Goods* (Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp. 165-173.

John Broome, "Equality." Chapter 9 of *Weighing Goods* (Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp. 174-201.

Week 13. Temporal Distributions of the Good (11/28)

John Broome, "Utilitarian Metaphysics?" Chapter 11 of *Weighing Goods*.

Tom Dougherty, "On Whether to Prefer Pain to Pass." *Ethics* 121:3 (2011), pp. 521-537.

Week 14. Student Papers and Wrap-Up (12/5)

Students taking the course for a grade will briefly present their ideas for feedback.

12/7 – PAPERS DUE