

Ethical Theory

Constraints on the Good

As you read the material for our next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the reading:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently about these issues at our next class meeting.

Reading

- Shelly Kagan, *Normative Ethics*, sections 3.1 & 3.2.

Questions

1. What is a “constraint” and why is it plausible to believe that there is such a prohibition against doing harm?
2. What is the difference between deontological and consequentialist moral theories at the level of factors?
3. Explain the argument claiming that consequentialism is “too permissive”. What is Kagan’s example to illustrate this point? What are the most plausible responses to this argument?
4. In discussing constraints, Kagan brings in the idea of thresholds. What are these and what difficulties might they create when applied to a constraint against doing harm?