

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY COLLOQUIUM SERIES

FEATURING SPEAKER DR. Karsten Klint Jensen

“Collective Harm: Economic Incentives vs. Individual Moral Duty”

ABSTRACT

Collective harm problems are problems where very many people contribute to some harm, the aggregated result of which is serious harm, although each individual's contribution to the harm is minuscule. Climate change is a good example. Since collective harm problems often involve free-rider problems, economists typically propose to change peoples' behavior by invoking economic incentives, e.g. a carbon tax. However, there is a widespread moral skepticism (well captured by Goodin (1994)) about this solution, because it renders a moral wrong, right, or least all right, i.e. it makes it acceptable to continue contributing to the harm. Thereby it takes the wrong attitude to an inherently moral problem. It must be an implication of Goodin's point that an individual's contribution is morally wrong. But if the harmful effects of this contribution are imperceptible, how could it be wrong? In the case of climate change, Sinnott-Armstrong (2005) has argued that an individual's act is "neither necessary nor sufficient for global warming." I shall argue that he is wrong and discuss two possible solutions to the problem of imperceptible harm: Parfit's (1984) and Kagan's (2011). However, a further implication of accepting the point that an individual's contribution is morally wrong seems to be that the individual ought not to contribute at all. That would appear both excessively costly and excessively inefficient. By comparison, economic incentives (in theory at least) ensure co-ordination in achieving the collective goal efficiently. I shall suggest that, from a consequentialist perspective, an individual must also have a duty to seek co-ordination and try to sketch what such a duty implies. If I am right, economic incentives and moral duties might then go hand in hand.



Thursday, October 5, 2017
3:45 p.m. -5:00 p.m.



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