Normative analysis

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Session 1. Normative epistemology. Tue 26 February, 13-15. Lilla Skansen (B340, 3rd floor, Department of Political Science)

Normative analysis is the activity of evaluating, and making, arguments pertaining to questions of right and wrong. Occupying center stage, therefore, is the soundness of normative premises – whether such premises can be justifiably held or not. This lecture offers a brief introduction to the different approaches to normative justification, in particular the distinctions between theoretical and intuitionist approaches and foundationalist and coherentist approaches. The essential claim of the lecture is that appeal to moral intuitions is unavoidable in normative analysis. The lecture also covers the basics of argumentation.

Exercise: turning natural language into arguments (handout).

Reading:


This lecture covers the basic methodology of normative analysis. The two important building blocks are intuitions and principles. Put very simply, normative analysis consists in thinking in a systematic way about how these two building blocks fit in the questions we are posing, checking for consistency and plausibility across comparable cases. The lecture will offer concrete examples of such analysis. The lecture also
covers the distinctions between internal and external normative critique and negative and positive normative analysis.

Exercise: conducting a small normative analysis (handout).

Reading:


Session 3. Techniques in normative analysis. Tue 5 March, 10-12. Lilla Skansen (B340)

Previous lectures have introduced normative analysis as an activity that seeks to evaluate the soundness of normative premises. In this lecture, we will focus specifically on different techniques that are involved in doing normative analysis. Special attention is given to thought experiments, but also we will also cover some prevalent forms of argumentation (e.g., reductio ad absurdum, dilemmas, slippery slope).

Exercise: conducting a thought experiment (handout).

- Brownlee, Kimberly and Stemplowska, Zofia, “Trapped in an Experience Machine with a Famous Violinist: Thought Experiments in Normative Theory” [Draft 2, 5 November 2010]

Session 4. Paper session. Tue 12 March, 13-16. Lilla Skansen (B340)

Prior to this session, each participant will have been allocated a journal article. At the session, each participant will present the normative argument that is made in their article. Special attention should be given do what is, at heart, going in the argument. I.e., participants should talk about the following questions: what is the major claim of
the article? On what grounds does the author believe that the claim is justified? What is the basic structure and content of the author’s way of trying to convince the reader that her major claim is justified?

Each participant should be prepared to speak about 15 minutes about his or her article. Powerpoint is available but not mandatory. The presentation will be followed by a short group discussion about the article the presenter has introduced.

Participation in the paper session is obligatory to gain credits for the course module. In case a student cannot attend the paper session, he or she is required to write her presentation in the form of a paper. The paper should be 2000-2500 words.

Final paper

Final papers are presented on Wed 27 March. Each participant presents his or her own paper and also acts as discussant of another participant’s paper.

The final paper should focus either on criticizing an existing normative argument (preferably one made in the academic literature) or on developing a positive normative argument for a particular claim.

A note on course content and the reading list

The module focuses squarely on normative analysis as a general method. This means that the course will not systematically discuss the various normative theories, and their corresponding concepts, that generate and underpin different normative principles. For such theories, which constitute the specific substance of normative analyses, there are many good introductions that the student might want to consult. For example: